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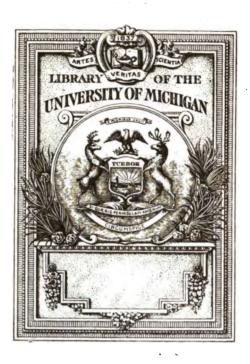
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THE HERMIT OF NOTTINGHAM A NOVEL BY CHARLES CONRAD ABBOTT



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TO

J. B. A.,

WHO FOR SO MANY YEARS HAS PATIENTLY PUT UP WITH ALL MY ECCENTRICITIES AND HAS SMOOTHED MANY A PATH THAT SEEMED TO ME IRREMEDIABLY ROUGH, THIS STORY OF AN OLD MAN, WHO WAS NO STRANGER TO US,

Affectionately Dedicateb.

C. C. A.

THREE BEECHES, May 26, 1897.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I PAGE
WANTED: A PEDIGREE 9
CHAPTER II
SOMETHING LIKE SUPERSTITION 24
CHAPTER III
THE HERMIT'S HOME INVADED 38
CHAPTER IV
PINCHBECK, BY THUNDER! 56
CHAPTER V
THE HERMIT'S SOLILOQUY 66
CHAPTER VI
In the Rôle of Reporter 81
CHAPTER VII
AT POVERTY CROSS 96
CHAPTER VIII
ATLANTA GUTHRIE ARRIVES 105
CHAPTER IX
ROBERT ATWOOD MEETS THE HERMIT 119
CHAPTER X
HENRY RIDGELEY RECEIVES A LETTER 141

CONTENTS

CHAPTER XI
ROBERT ATWOOD MEETS ATLANTA GUTHRIE 151
•
CHAPTER XII
ALICE RIDGELEY SEES THE HERMIT 167
CHAPTER XIII
ATLANTA GUTHRIE CALLS ON HENRY RIDGE-
LEY
CHAPTER XIV
ROBERT ATWOOD RETURNS 199
CHAPTER XV
THE RIDGELEYS AT HOME
CHAPTER XVI
An Interrupted Breakfast 253
CHAPTER XVII
A NIGHT IN THE WOODS 265
•
CHAPTER XVIII
THEY MET BY CHANCE
CHAPTER XIX
ROBERT ATWOOD GOES HOME 305
CHAPTER XX
ALICE RIDGELEY AT HOME
CHAPTER XXI
THE HERMIT AGAIN ALONE 321
CHAPTER XXII
WHEREIN A DECISION IS REACHED 324

THE

HERMIT OF NOTTINGHAM

CHAPTER I

WANTED: A PEDIGREE

"CAY, Bob, you've got positively nothing to do, so won't you go up to Riverside, I believe it is, and then go back into the country a mile or two and ask for a Miss Ridgeley, and request her to tell you how Grandpa Bloomfield was related to the Brookses. And say, Bob,-that's a good boy,look at the records, or whatever they call them, for the date of great-grandfather's wedding, and put it all down straight, and then come home quick as you can and let me know. Now there's a chance to spend a day worth having, and you can skip your club and Chestnut Street just for once."

When his sister stopped and drew in

a long breath, her good-natured brother Robert walked to the door of the library, and, calling to his mother, whom he knew was within hearing, said,—

"Mother, do come in here. Helen has a fit or something, or has gone mad. Do come quick."

"What do you mean, my son?" exclaimed Mrs. Atwood, as she came forward with something more than her usual speed, even when she felt hurried. She found her daughter standing in the middle of the room, apparently in excellent health, but with rather more than her usual color.

"I think Bob's real mean," Helen said, before her mother could repeat her question. "He won't go to Riverside and find out what I want to know, and you said yourself it would be so nice for me to join the Revolutionary Daughters of Colonial Dames."

"Oh, oh, oh!" gurgled her brother Robert, as he looked steadily into the grate and tried to send the smoke of a cigarette up the chimney.

"I say, mother," he remarked, when his face straightened, "I always knew you had a revolutionary daughter, but are you really a colonial dame and older than grandmother?"

"Hush, Robert," replied Mrs. Atwood. "Helen, dear, do get things straight and be a little less impulsive. You mean Daughters of the Revolution or Colonial Dames. I prefer the latter, for many reasons, though you could be either, I think. Did you go to the Historical Society?"

"Of course I did; and Miss Krosscutt told me lots and gave me a paper with something printed on it——"

"She'd not be likely to give you a blank sheet of paper, would she?" asked Robert.

"Now, hush, Bob, as mother told you," Helen said, impatiently, and continued, "It's to fill out, I believe; and so I asked Bob——"

"Please, Helen, say 'Robert' or 'brother,' said her mother, quietly.

"Then he shan't call me Hel for

Nelly, that's all; and I want him to go to Riverside. I don't see why people don't live where we can know all about them. How far is it? Could I go alone?"

"No, dear, not alone, and it isn't necessary you should go at all. I think brother will look it up for you, if you don't expect everything at a moment's notice." Then, turning to her son, Mrs. Atwood continued, "Couldn't you go, Robert, and in Riverside ask for Henry Ridgeley, and so find out? Any one, I think, could direct you to his office."

"Office? What sort of a one?" Robert asked.

"I am not positive. Real estate and insurance, I think; but your father can tell."

"As he will not be home for a month, that isn't much of a suggestion," replied Robert, laughing.

"True; well, he is well known there, I am sure, and you will have no trouble."

"That's all plain enough; but Nell

says it's back in the country I'm to go."

"And you can hire a horse and carriage and drive out, I suppose," replied his mother.

"And find nobody at home. But I don't mind. Let's see. I'll have to go by way of Market Street Ferry. I'll study it out down town, so don't fret, sis; and here's to the Torylutionary dames." And brother Robert sent a circle of smoke whirling towards the ceiling as he left the room.

"I think Bob's real mean to make fun of me so," Helen said to her mother when the young man had gone.

"It is because you are so impulsive, Helen, and get things so mixed. You do not take up with a new idea, but let the idea take you up and toss you about. Do take matters more quietly."

"Mother, I can't. All the girls are joining and I want to, too; and I don't care what it's about, only I don't want to be left out in the cold."

Mother and daughter soon separated,

the former to her household cares, the latter idling her time with some impatience until it was late enough to stroll down the street, for Helen Atwood was very near to those spoiled darlings that do not look seriously upon life, and, as a fact, take hold of the brief creed, "I was born to be happy," with a firmer grip than they do the suggestions of their pastors. All this, of course, would be in time outgrown, but too often lingers longer in a life than is desirable, and years that are well fitted for intellectual advancement are frittered away.

While mother and daughter were engaged in-doors Robert was on his way down town, and this had been his practice for several years. For eight months in the year he had gone down town at the same time every morning, and returned with almost the same mathematical regularity. Think of it! Facing the Delaware in the A.M., and facing the Schuylkill in the P.M., week in and week out, without variation or shadow of turning! A voluntary tread-mill existence,

and almost as monotonous. What excellent bricks are in Philadelphia pavements! Twice daily the same narrow line of sidewalk is tramped over, not only by Robert Atwood but by a thousand others; and twice daily, but later. the sisters of these young men wend their ways to and fro along the same pathway, yet there is no trace of constant travel. What a deep trail they would make if tramping through the woods or across lots! The exception to the rule may be very slow, but it is absolutely sure. We have mid-day darkness when there is a total eclipse. To-day Robert Atwood had a new purpose in going down town, and he was meditating on the desirability of novel sensations as he approached his club.

This young man was like a leaf on the topmost twig of some tall tree. He had had all his life a commanding outlook upon the social world. From his eminent position—a birthright one—he had looked for years, from the front windows of the Exclusive Club, up and down

Walnut Street and across Exclusive Square to the stately mansions behind the trees. He was accustomed to seeing much and surveying little. As the leaf from its grand outlook gazed upon a wide-spread reach of pretty country. and had heard the sweetest songs of many a warbling bird, so, too, had Robert, by means of his social eminence, seen the best of his native city. and heard all the best singers not only of the opera but those who charmed the chosen few of private parlors. And as the leaf has never given thought to the tree's trunk or dreamed of the sturdy roots that had firm hold upon the earth, so Robert had only a vague knowledge that his family had a stately trunk, and this in turn was merged into the roots that aspired not even to daylight, but labored to keep their place in the soil where nature placed them. As incurious as the leaf, he had never gone below his appointed place to see where the foundations rested. He, like his companions, must in time fall, that he knew,

and his bones rest with the ancestral dust, as the leaf falls when the blighting touch of frost shall come; but now it seemed a little like anticipating all this to go back into the country and dig and delve among the musty records that tell of primitive folk who had lived nearer to Mother Earth than he ever dreamed of. He would have shuddered at the thought of a permanent shelter in the home of his ancestors. Still, as he thought the matter over, a sense of novelty took possession of him, and, to his credit, he was devoted to his sister. She, he often thought, must keep up the family's standing, and he believed she could. He was a bachelor, and should remain one; that was settled. She would marry well, he felt, or not at all, he hoped, and so the Atwoods would disappear as such, the name dying with his parents and himself

"Of course I'll go, if just to please Nelly; but it's a good deal like groping in the dark, unless I can get something more in the way of a guide as to this

business. I'll ask Tom Procter; he comes from over in Jersey, I think."

Two days later it came to pass that Robert Atwood went to Riverside on Nelly's errand. He learned at his club that the town could be reached most readily by taking the cars at Broad Street Station to Clifton and crossing the river to the town opposite, and that the walk to the Ridgeleys was just long enough for wholesome exercise; but not until he reached Clifton did he learn that the ferry was operated at the convenience of the captain, and he must wait a full hour while Captain Rodno attended to a little business in his office. whole hour lost, pish!" and the young man would have articulated his disgust more distinctly had no one been near. His profanity was monosyllabic and only made use of under strong provocation. Somehow the hour stolen from him by the pig-headed ferryman, in a sense, must be passed, and Clifton hotels were not inviting. After a moment's thought, Robert Atwood concluded to stroll up

River Street and back, seeing so much of Clifton, and viewing from afar, to his annoyance, the sleeping sands of South Jersey. Now, he found River Street was pretty, particularly so in May, and the few people that he met had a thoroughly self-satisfied air, which circumstance led him to conclude that River Street was a spot peculiarly blessed in their estimation,-so blessed that all who dwelt bevond its limits were to be pitied. Robert felt that, seeing he was a stranger, he was pitied by the folk he met, and he did not like it. Could it be possible, he wondered, even in a quiet little village unknown to the outside world, that the people were divided and subdivided.—a few on this shelf and a few on that, and all so stirred by jealousies that the poor pastors of the several churches had hard time of it to prevent open warfare. Robert looked up the quiet cross-streets and wondered why as good people could not live there, but he doubted it. atmosphere of River Street whispered the open secret, or he read it in the faces

of the airish girls he met, that a backstreeter seeks too much in expecting recognition on Clifton's main avenue. A carriage and pair could not secure more than civil treatment from the people who lived on River Street. They were a peculiar people,—set apart, in their own estimation,—and woe unto him who "Yet," Robert ventured to forgets it. sav to himself, "they are really like every other community, very much of a mixture, I have no doubt. Doubtless. this pretty road along the river-shore has its rich liars and poor truthful folk. and the happy medium who prefer the latter, to the disgust of the mendacious plutocrats."

Robert Atwood imagined all this and much more as he passed house after house. There was nothing strange in it. He was right in all essential particulars, for the simple reason that such a condition everywhere exists. What he had seen of the world elsewhere was true of this small town, and so it is even of the unfashionable, informal

back country. He of the newly-painted house snubs his neighbor of the white-washed cottage. Thinking how funny it all was, and finding he had gone far enough not to have to hurry back, he was just turning about when he was somewhat startled by a salutation apparently addressed to him.

"Hello, Bob, where do you hail from?"

Robert looked up and saw a club acquaintance whom he had long known, and replied, "Hello, Ned, what are you doing here?"

- "Loafing at present. Came on an errand, and am on my way to the station."
 - "Know anybody here?" Robert asked.
 - "Yes: the Maurices."
- "Who?" asked Robert, with a tone suggestive of surprise.
 - "The Maurices," repeated his friend.
- "Big name for a little place. Fresh importation?"
- "Oh, no. Lived here a long time. Connected with the railroad, and up and

down to the city every day. Have a jolly place on the river-bank?"

"Seemed to me," Robert remarked,
"as I walked along, this river-shore was
something better than being shut in by
the same old evergreens as out our
way."

"I like it here," replied his friend; "but it's a long way from healthy. Chills every year till you get used to 'em."

"The deuce!"

"Exactly so, deuce or two; chills and fever."

"Give us a rest, Ned; I'm going across when the fellow's ready to paddle his old tub over."

"Over to Riverside?"

"Yes, and beyond; I've got an errand over there, and it's lucky these are long days."

"Sorry I can't keep you company. I'd get Algernon Maurice to set you across, but he's so awful lazy. You'll save time by waiting for the ferry. It isn't much to row across, but Algy turns pale if you mention a row-boat."

"Due, I suppose," said Robert, "to living in a sleepy village. Seems to me everybody I met was yawning or wanted to."

"You're about right; but I'm pushed for time; good-by."

It was so unusual for any one to hurry on River Street, that many a face peeped through the blinds as Edward Anderson strode away, and when he was gone these same faces stared at and wondered who Robert Atwood might be and what was his errand. Had they followed him, they would have learned that he crossed the ferry to Riverside, and something more, perhaps,-that he had become quite interested in Clifton, and determined to ask Ned Anderson more about it; and when the ferry-boat was rounding the lower end of Matinicunk Island, he thought he would like to take a boatride all around it, even if he went with Algernon Maurice.

CHAPTER II

SOMETHING LIKE SUPER-STITION

"A FORK and two spoons, mother, what does it mean?"

"It means, I presume, two spoons and a fork, Alice; what else could it mean?"

"But I dropped 'em, and so somebody's coming. It's a sure sign; and thee or Aunt Martha said so."

"Not I, surely."

"Well, somebody's coming, so I'll keep on the lookout. Is my hair smooth?"

"Alice, what is the matter with thee, to carry on so? It is silly to go on so. Does thee expect anybody?" And Mrs. Ridgeley looked very intently at her lively daughter for a moment.

Ker-rik-ker-rek-kee-oo!

"And there's the old red rooster, right

at the kitchen door. What better evidence of prophetic warning, as Robert Kirby says every First-day morning, and has said for twenty years, with a shout as he sits down, about the "ings of weagles.'"

"Alice, dear, don't carry on so," said her mother, in a half-amused, half-supplicating way.

"Carry on? Why, mother, it is the simple, sober truth. Thee said thyself that friend Kirby preached that same sermon at thy wedding, and here am I, a sedate maiden of twenty, who has been brought up on it; but never mind. No, I didn't expect anybody, of course, until all this happened; but now, somebody's coming and I wish I knew who." And Alice looked up the long lane and suddenly turned about with a rueful countenance, or else an assumed air of deep disappointment.

"It's just my luck. The fish-man is in the lane. Want any clams, mother?" And Alice imitated cleverly the fish-monger's voice.

Mrs. Ridgeley could not repress a smile, and replied,—

"No, dear, not to-day. Will thee tell him, please?"

Alice pulled her pet collie's ear with a trace of impatience while she waited for the lumbering old fish-wagon to approach, and then, as suddenly as April clouds make way for sunshine, her face was wreathed in smiles.

"There is somebody coming, after all," she called to her mother. "I'll believe in falling forks hereafter, rooster and spoons thrown in. Somebody, sure enough, and a stranger."

Alice said, "No" very curtly to the astonished fish-monger before the man had spoken, but he, not being a fool, saw how preoccupied she was, and significantly grinning, after glancing down the lane, much to her indignation, he went directly to the kitchen door and announced fresh fish in such persuasive way that Mrs. Ridgeley bought more than she needed, though possibly vaguely impressed by the statements of both her

daughter and this man that a visitor was in the lane.

When a young woman sees a young man approaching her home, and realizes at a glance that he is not only a stranger but evidently a person of equal social standing, her curiosity is at once aroused. This is one of the laws or rules concerning humanity absolutely without exception. Who is he? What does he want? These are the two questions that are invariably asked in the same breath and, of course, never immediately answered.

Alice Ridgeley was not given to idleness, and yet never had had too much to do. In other words, she enjoyed life, and when the merry May days came, it seemed to her that all the world should feel as she did, disposed to laugh, sing, and dance. Mere quiet walking and serious meditation could wait till the year was older.

The day was perfect and bird-full as a May day in central New Jersey only can be, with never a bough but with

its warbler, and never a fruit-tree but laden with blossoms. Alice Ridgeley had not yet met with any setbacks. She knew sorrow only from hearsay or seen its marks on others. She did not hold herself as proof against it when it came, but until it did she must laugh and love the world as she found it, and the stranger now drawing near to where she was standing, by a great sweetbrier near the door, was a source of genuine pleasure, because an unexpected incident of the day. Birds and flowers, she had supposed, would occupy pretty much all her time, but here was something new, and she felt a little like the field naturalist when he finds himself face to face with a new species. "He's goodlooking," she said to herself; he's welldressed, she noted at a glance. He's from the city, she assured herself with a positiveness that would do credit to Lucretius in his way of laying down the law.

By this time passive mental activity had to give way to active thought and

action, for the stranger was now at arm's length, and she looked up at the proper moment to see him raising his hat in the most approved manner and to hear him ask, "Is Miss Ridgeley at home?"

"I am Miss Ridgely, or as I should say, I suppose, Alice Ridgeley. Can I be of any service?"

Robert Atwood handed her his card, and said as he did so, "Your resemblance to Henry Ridgeley of Riverside is so marked, I felt sure to whom I was speaking."

"Well, that is news to me. Harry's dark and I am light; or do you mean I look just like a man?" Alice asked, with a bewitching smile that told just a little on Robert Atwood.

How he wanted to look indefinitely at her dark blue eyes, but he looked away as he replied, "Oh, I did not mean that, but there is a strong family likeness, do you not think so?"

"I suppose there is," replied Alice, "but I never thought much about it. Will you come in?"

"Thanks, but really it is delightful here."

"And you prefer standing to sitting?" asked Alice, giving him again a look that stirred his pulse.

"Well, I can hardly say that, but the step of the porch will do very well, though I am not tired."

"Would not the seat on the porch be better than the step?"

"Really, I did not-"

"Notice, I see; you are from the city. Are not city men comprehensively observant? You saw the porch and was not aware there was a seat on each side of it. I am not tired of standing, but I think it more comfortable to sit when one has something to say."

Robert's ears tingled just a little. He had not anticipated such a reception, but rather scanty words from a demure Quakeress. After a moment's pause, he recovered himself and said, "Please, Miss Ridgeley, permit me to state my errand and the question of being seated can be settled afterwards. I understand you

are the keeper of the Riverside Quaker Meeting Records, and I desired to consult them for my sister."

"Yes, it is true that I have the records in charge, but now they are not all here; only the later ones."

"That's bad for me," said Robert.
"I wanted to learn what I could from them of Marmaduke Bloomfield."

"Marmaduke Bloomfield! Are you a descendant of his?" Alice asked, with evident surprise.

"I am told by my sister that I am," Robert replied.

"And I am of his brother, so go back one step and we have a common ancestor. I have the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a new cousin." And Alice made a neat little courtesy, such as was known to our grandmothers and is now almost a lost art. Robert Atwood bowed profoundly, and was struggling hard to find something very nice to say, when Alice continued, "But cousins of remote degree are always very plentiful."

"And so they do not appeal to you?" he asked.

"Well, not always," she slowly and thoughtfully replied.

"You have probably had some unfortunate experience?" Robert suggested.

"Not at all; but I can give you such a shock, if you wish it." And Alice tried hard not to laugh, although there was really nothing to laugh at, but she could not go about with a grim countenance on a bright May morning.

"I cannot say," replied Robert, "that I am a candidate for disappointment, and yet I read it in your manner, Miss Ridgeley."

"The Riverside records will not aid you much, if at all, as your ancestor was not a Friend,—that is, he was once, but not in later life. I am truly sorry, if you have had all this trouble for nothing."

"Joined some other church, you mean?" suggested Robert.

"No, not that. He was disowned by the Friends." And Alice looked at

THE PROPERTY OF THE PERSON OF

the blooming sweetbrier as she spoke. Robert Atwood drew in a long breath and then came very near whistling. Alice read him like a book, and, with a merry laugh at his puzzled countenance, said, "Oh, whistle if you like. That's what all the birds are doing."

"And am I a bird?" asked Robert.

"I am not prepared to express any opinion; but you are disappointed, and I am awfully sorry. You came to me for this information, and what could I do? I mean that I can only tell you what you do not wish to know. Our records do not mention his marriage."

"But you know about his brother?" Robert remarked, scarcely knowing what to say.

"Yes; he was my great-grandfather, and lived here, and built this house in 1800," Alice replied, not looking at Robert as she spoke.

"And did his father before him live here?" Robert asked.

"Yes; out there in the workshop." And Alice pointed to an old frame

building that had once been a dwelling.

"And my ancestor," continued Robert, "was born there and moved to where?"

"About a mile away, where he lived long enough to repent of his folly, so I have heard father say." And Alice showed she was quite tired of discussing the matter.

"'Repent of his folly,'" Robert repeated. "Oh, I see!" And from that moment he did not need to be further instructed. He knew now that his ancestor had never married, and so he bit his lips and wondered what next to say.

Alice Ridgeley bit hers and was awfully sorry she had said so much.

There was an embarrassing pause that time would have made worse had not Mrs. Ridgeley come to the door at the right moment and asked the stranger if he would not be seated, and could her daughter give him the desired information.

Robert Atwood bowed to the mother

of his fair companion, and assuring her he had learned what he wished to know—Alice interrupted him momentarily by a little gurgle that meant volumes, but he quickly recovered himself and continued that his visit had proved an unexpected pleasure—another gurgle in Alice's fair throat—and he would not trespass further upon their time, and he was about to conclude with "goodmorning," when Mrs. Ridgeley, seeing he was somewhat ill at ease, asked him if he would not be seated and rest himself after his walk from town.

Robert Atwood was not at all disposed to do so under the circumstances. If the unexpected had not happened he could have spent the whole day over old records under Miss Ridgeley's guidance; but as it was, he had no relish for genealogical research; so, bowing to the ladies, he turned and walked slowly down the lane.

Mother and daughter stood in the door-way a moment looking at Robert's retreating figure and then passed into

the house. As they did so, Alice said to her mother,—

- "I wish I'd never heard of the Riverside records or the Bloomfields either."
- "Why, dear, what is the trouble now?" asked her mother.
- "Mother, the look on his face when he guessed the truth about old Marmaduke Bloomfield was horrible. It's enough to haunt me for a week."
- "Was the young man a Bloomfield?" Mrs. Ridgeley asked.
 - "No; here is his card."

Robert Stwood.

1820 Elm Avenue.

THE PERSON NAMED IN COLUMN TWO IS NOT THE PERSON NAMED IN COLUMN TWO IS NOT THE PERSON NAMED IN COLUMN TWO IS NAMED IN COLUMN TO THE PERSON NAMED IN COLUMN TWO IS NAMED IN COLUMN TO THE PERSON NAMED IN COLUMN TWO IS NAMED IN COLUMN TO THE PERSON NAMED IN COLUMN TWO IS NAMED IN COLUMN TO THE PERSON NAMED IN COLUMN TWO IS NAMED IN COLUMN TWO IN

"Oh, an Atwood. I know of them; well, the Atwood part is all right," remarked Mrs. Ridgeley.

"Then," said Alice, "the Bloomfield part is all on the surface in his case, for he was not all right in looks when it dawned upon him and he said, after me, 'Repent of his folly.' It sounded like a voice from the tombs."

"Really, Alice, the young man seems to have made an impression on thee."

"An exceedingly disagreeable one, mother, I am sorry to say," Alice replied, and then she stepped again into the wide hall and turned towards the lane. She saw Robert Atwood at the roadgate, standing still, and, as she thought, looking towards the house. Was he going to return? In a moment the field-glasses that hung by the old clock were brought into use, and she found that she was right, in part; he was looking back; and then she thought he was looking directly into her eyes from the other end of the glasses, and she promptly put them in their case and went to her room.

CHAPTER III

THE HERMIT'S HOME INVADED

N admirably well-dressed woman of some thirty summers,—it might be more or less, no one could tell.-and who was noticeable perhaps more from her manner than any marked characteristic of form or feature, left, with an audible expression of dissatisfaction, or, shall we say, of resignation, her comfortable seat in the Pullman car when the train stopped at Riverside. She surveyed the surroundings with some slight show of interest as if she felt that here was to be the scene of some future events wherein she was to figure. She glanced at every passenger that was going away, or, like her, leaving the train, and her manner caused very nearly every one who saw her to look back at her with an expression of curiosity plainly shown

on their faces. Whether or not this woman was really curious as to those whom she saw, the interest of certain Riverside people in her was unquestionable. After a full two minutes of this staring and staring back, the stranger asked a uniformed attendant at the station for a carriage and driver. This good-natured enemy of valise and trunk was somewhat astonished at the woman's imperious manner, but gave her the necessary information as to where her want could be supplied, and she marched off not a little nettled to find that the man was not wholly at her beck and call. But she was too intent upon her errand to spend many moments in fault-finding, and telling the stable-owner what she required, and paying in advance, was soon on her way out the Pemberton pike. What was the trend of her thoughts for the first two miles of her journey is not known, but that she was anticipating an exciting meeting somewhere, with some one, was evident. Her manner, even as she sat well back in the

carriage seat, showed she was preparing for a wordy conflict; or did she carry a deadly stiletto in her bosom, and was she capable of thrusting it unawares into her opponent's heart? Such things have happened, and this woman's eyes were suggestive of unlimited grit if her physique did not suggest bodily strength. Suddenly her face assumed a gentle and quite self-satisfied expression. Whatever the ordeal, she was prepared, and at this moment the carriage stopped and the driver startled his passenger by loudly shouting, "Gate!"

Miss Atlanta Guthrie, for this was her name, became impatient, closed her eyes until they merely glittered as narrow lines of emerald-tinted glass and the picture of annoyance, looked from the carriage window, to find that progress was barred by the closed turnpike gate. What it meant, for the moment, she did not know, and was about to speak when Samantha Smedley appeared and as usual, before opening the gate, waited for the toll.

"Let us pass immediately," Miss Guthrie demanded in tones that usually forced compliance.

"Where are you going?" asked Samantha, calmly.

"Open the gate; do you not hear me?" she repeated. "Are you going to keep us here all day?"

"Where are you going? If to Pemberton, it is eight cents," replied Samantha, smiling in a most irritating way at Miss Guthrie.

"It is of no consequence to you where I am bound," replied Miss Guthrie, and she threw a small silver coin at the gate-tender and sank back into the cushioned carriage seat. Still, the carriage did not move. The delay continued, and, out of all patience, Miss Gurthrie was about to take more rigorous measures in the matter, when she saw the driver regaining his seat on the carriage and Samantha drawing the bolt that the gate might swing open. What Miss Guthrie was about to remark in passing will never be known. Before

she had time to utter a word, she was astonished beyond expression to see the cool Samantha actually smile and say "Good-morning."

"This, then, is the sort of people," Miss Guthrie remarked to herself, when she recovered. "they have in the North. is it? Well! I don't wonder the Atwoods and others are such sticks. idea of that wretch holding me there for toll! and why didn't the driver attend to If everybody up North's as good as everybody, then nobody's good for much." And with this bit of philosophy Miss Atlanta Guthrie lapsed into silence, and was comparatively cool and amiable again when the carriage stopped just where a few acres of heavy woodland, remnant of the primeval forest to all appearance, bordered on the road.

"Another gate-woman?" Miss Guthrie asked herself, and then saw the form of the driver bending dexterously outward and backward from his seat and heard him say, "This is the place, madam."

"Then why do you not open the door that I may get out?" she asked.

"I thought perhaps you wanted to ride to the house, but I don't think there is a wagon track through them trees."

"No, I will walk." And when the driver opened the door, Miss Guthrie alighted and shook herself in that artistic way that dissipates wrinkles in dress and gives a catching freshness to woman's attire.

"That is his house, madam," said the driver, pointing with his whip to a small two-roomed structure that could hardly be seen down the narrow path that led to it.

"Very well; and now, driver, I will walk there, and you wait until I signal to you by waving my parasol. If I motion to you to go on, take your horses where you choose, but be here again in just one hour. Have you got a watch?"

[&]quot;Yes'm."

[&]quot;And you understand my directions?"
"Yes'm."

"All right, then; and now I'll see if the hermit is at home."

Probably Miss Guthrie was not accustomed to walking along woodland paths. She continually stubbed her pretty toes, and as continually muttered something better left unsaid; at least so in minds of the unco' good, but we can no more safely check mild profanity than perspiration. It is equally dangerous. Fortunately for the lady the distance was short, and her ease of manner and surface amiability returned when treading the smooth sod about the quaint old cabin's door. She knocked with the ferrule end of her parasol, and heard immediately a distinct but not very cordial "Come in," and with it, to make ill matters worse, was as distinct a growl from an evidently very unamiable dog. Miss Guthrie became weak at once. All arrogance was laid aside, and as a flash came a vision of her one-time comfortable Southern home. The door was not opened for her, and for a moment she was afraid to lift the latch, but she

also saw that she had gone so far that this too she must do. Lifting it slowly, she opened the door gradually into the room. and as she entered she saw an old man coming towards her. The dog growled again, but was silenced by his master and the "come in" was repeated, but in an even less assuring manner. Guthrie at this juncture thought of the driver, and retreating, signalled to him to go on, which he did, and then, turning about to re-enter the cabin, was astonished to find the door was closed. timidly opened it the second time and stepped into the room. As she did so she said, "Is this Arthur Bloomfield?"

"Will you be seated, madam?" said the hermit, pointing to a chair; and when Miss Guthrie had accepted that invitation he asked, "Why, madam, do you wish to know?"

"If you are, then you are dear grandma's brother, and I am so glad to see you," replied Miss Guthrie, in a soft, purring way that quite covered up the irrelevancy of her words.

The hermit looked very intently at his visitor while she was speaking, and when she stopped said, in a very quiet way, "You have no evidence, madam, that I am your great-uncle, nor, necessarily, I any that you are my great-niece; and," after pausing a few seconds, during which Miss Guthrie was anything but comfortable, he continued, "if it were all true, what does it matter? I do not wish my solitude disturbed nor my several occupations interrupted."

"But, my dear uncle, you surely would not turn me out of doors, when I have come so many miles to see you?" And Miss Guthrie looked at him in such a wide-eyed innocent surprise that she was positively handsome.

The hermit did not notice her at all, but looked in every other direction while he spoke, and was gazing thoughtfully at the floor when he said, "My cabin is only fitted for myself, and you came uninvited. If nothing but curiosity prompted you, please retire; if you have hopes of any information or of—

well, of anything, your visit visit is in vain. Good-morning, madam."

- "But, uncle--"
- "I am not your uncle---"
- "You are, sir. You are Arthur Bloomfield, and now the only hope of my poor mother, who is old and ill and bade me come to you."
 - "For what?"
 - "For help."
 - "How can I help you?"
 - "By money or jewels."

At these words the hermit started and moved one step quickly towards Miss Guthrie. He turned very red and closed his fists, and, had she been a man, might have struck her, his anger was so great. Then, as quickly becoming calm, he asked, "How could she know that I lived here, was living at all, or, living, had means to aid her? It is folly, madam. It is some prank of my inquisitive neighbors that sent you here." You must leave me. I insist upon it. Good-morning."

"No, uncle, no; indeed, it is not. I

am—oh, I had forgotten to tell you!—
I am Atlanta Guthrie, and my grandmother was your sister Ada——"

"My sister Ada. How strangely that sounds as spoken by another! Madam, yes, I had a sister Ada. You seem to know something of me. Yet others have sisters of that name. How did you find me?"

"My people have known of you all along. They were not so witless as to let you be quite lost to them," replied the hermit's niece, for such she really was.

"There's not in any city," said the hermit, with a confidence that indicated his sincerity, "any one who has had knowledge of me all these years. I cannot believe you. There's something strange about it, this coming of yours here, but I will ask no questions. Oblige me by returning to your home." Saying this, the old man moved to the door, and, placing one hand upon it, said, in a low tone, as if meant only for himself, "The latch shall be a lock in time to come."

Miss Guthrie recognized the fact that the critical moment had come and she had her last card to play. Her future was at stake, and would that last card prove a winning one? She changed her attitude and assumed one that suggested supplication, but with her inordinate pride still showing. She hoped to attract his attention but could not and. after a moment's silence, said, in a clear, musical voice that would move an ordinary mortal, "Please listen but a moment and I will go. Though well she knew your purpose would not change, my grandmother kept track of all your wanderings, and knew the very day you settled in this spot. Yes, and knew why you came. She was your guardian angel, and no harm nor hurt could have come to you and she not known it, and when her end drew nigh she confided to my mother all she knew; and at last, feeling how forlorn and lonely you must be, I came, with her consent, to make this known and ask you to reconsider your decision and spend your days with

us." And the eager and excited woman drew a long breath, indicative of intense relief. Now her part had been performed, her pretty piece, long practised, was now spoken, and she had but to await, as patient as she could, the result of her life's greatest effort.

For the second time during the interview the hermit looked directly at Miss Guthrie, and he smiled even when she was done speaking. Then he said. "I did not live in the world for more than fifty years and learn nothing of it; and even now I can detect the difference between some realities and shams, though lack of such skill wrecked my life, as people of the world might say. have been well drilled, madam. Your rehearsals no doubt were frequent, your studies well directed, but you are not an actress,-you cannot conceal from all the truth that never leaves those eyes of yours. Pardon me, but they hang a warning banner out when you are lying. There is something about your appearance, manner, and voice that makes your

story have a semblance of truth, but your plans have not been laid with sufficient cunning. Tell your mother, if she is living and you are who you claim to be, that her uncle is content and well. That is my only message."

"But, uncle, one word more-"

"Not another word. Good-morning, madam, good-morning." And the hermit opened wide the cabin door, with an expression of determination Miss Guthrie realized was not to be gainsaid. There was but the one thing to do, and she did it without so much as muttering a formal good-by.

The waiting coachman had heard enough in his day of the hermit to believe that his passenger would not prolong her stay till the hour was up, and he was not at all surprised to see the lady coming. As she approached he thought that, if all women were like her, all men would go crazy. Her slender figure,—that seemed positively snake-like, so swift, smooth, and silent her movements,—her red-gold hair, and

green eyes shaded by black lashes, were new to him. He had seen but commonplace humanity heretofore. He certainly had never had such a passenger before in his several years of experience as a livery driver. Many strange people, as he thought them, had he taken from point to point, but of them all he could recall no one distinctly. This woman, to-day, was one he should never forget. What now? he wondered, as she came up; and it was with relief that he heard her orders,—

"To the Riverside Station."

"Well, Pudge," said the hermit to his faithful dog, when his visitor was out of sight, "this part of the world is getting too crowded. It seems we have been run down, like foxes in their holes, and the quiet of old times is to be no longer ours. Think of exchanging our birds and squirrels—yes, and even the pretty skunk under the wood-shed—for people!"

Pudge barked his disapproval of such a change.

Then the hermit's face became graver,

and he softly muttered to himself, "Guthrie, Miss Guthrie, Atlanta Guthrie. My sister, Ada. I wish these words could all be blotted out. This woman has an eye to what I've other use for, and never a jewel falls into her hands or theirs. Ada is gone and I am going——" then, suddenly, in a totally different and wholly cheerful tone, he broke out with, "Say, Pudge!" and waited, so it seemed, for the dog's response; for Pudge immediately leaped into the air and barked, showing his readiness for further commands.

"Let's out into the woods," said the hermit, "this merry morning and listen to the birds. Their songs will take the sound of that creature's voice out of my ears. What I said is true; it must be a lock now on the door instead of a latch."

Taking up his polished hickory staff, the hermit and Pudge wandered by a narrow path far into the woods, and not a bird they met but seemed glad to see them. They wandered on until they came to where two stunted but very old cedars grew in a wilderness of oaks,

making, as it were, a dark green island in a light green sea, and here they rested. Pudge curled at the foot of the smaller tree and the hermit sat opposite, resting his back against the other. It was evidently a place familiar to them both; their movements showed that and not a bird of the backwoods but knew them The chewink that nested near well came by and chirped a welcome. too, the peewee, that found pleasure in these woods. Then the mid-day silence of deep woods prevailed, and only at long intervals the note of some distant bird or the call of an over-flying crow was heard. Here, and no wonder, the quiet-loving hermit could think best. and if so moved, could speak aloud without fear of others catching at his words. Yet he never accepted the apparent conditions. He spoke to the dog, and immediately Pudge ranged the woods about his master, silently but sure, and returned soon, announcing with a low bark that the coast was clear.

"Then, Pudge," the hermit said, "if

no one is peeping over my shoulder. I will look at the only human face that concerns me still, and will-and will to the end." And then he drew from an inner pocket a small daguerreotype and looked long and lovingly at it. He did not move, nor was there any change of It was as if that instant the expression. hermit had been turned to marble. Pudge was not insensible to the surrounding world. He heard a footstep. and immediately rubbed his nose on the hermit's arm and muttered a warning. In an instant the portrait-case was closed; the hermit took up his staff and stood up. If any person came, he would not be found napping by him. The rustling of dead leaves was now plainly heard, and very soon a neighbor's cow came wandering that way. As was always the case, the hermit was pleased with the dog's intelligence, and said a kindly word.

"You're right, Pudge. I would not trust even my neighbor's cow. Let's back to the cabin."

CHAPTER IV

PINCHBECK, BY THUNDER!

ROBERT ATWOOD did not enjoy his walk down the long lane of Ridgeley Farm. He had gone up the same feeling excellently well-satisfied with himself, but now the world had a slightly different aspect. No real reason for it, it is true, but the fact remained that now there was a fly in the ointment, and of all petty grievances in this world the aforesaid fly takes the lead.

When sure that he was out of hearing, he said to himself, but very audibly, "Pinchbeck, by thunder! and she! Well, once in a while we do meet with the genuine article."

Men are always at their best when they are forced to take the world seriously, and without childish fretfulness or a fool's obstinacy, deliberately sit down to think, and Robert Atwood, finding

clean grass and a gently sloping sod at the foot of an old oak at the lane gate, sat down to think. Of course there is always some flaw in the most uniform surface. There is one weak link in the chain, though it may be strong enough to meet ordinary wear and tear, but when the real testing strain comes, that is the link to yield. The young man could not have chosen a more delightful spot for his temporary thinking office, but there was a possibility of his being interrupted in a lane; of that fact he did not think, nor was he aware what the field-glasses had reported of him at the Ridgelev house.

"Let me take account of stock, as a merchant would say," was Robert Atwood's remark, as he seated himself. "My great-grandfather was Marmaduke Bloomfield, and her ancestor was a brother of his. Now, let's see; their children would be first cousins; these cousins' children would be second cousins, that's mother and her father; and their children, that's the girl up there."

And Robert, without knowing why, stood up and looked up the lane; then realizing the absurdity of such a move, sat down and continued, "The girl there and myself, we are third cousins. Well, it is not very near. Hardly enough to be useful, perhaps. What a cussed idiot I am making of myself, talking this way, even if it's only to the wind! My third cousin, or would be, if the fellow hadn't made a thundering old fool of himself, and this is what I came into this blessed back-country settlement to find out. We had better shut up shop and go out of the ancestry business. What the mischief to tell Nell I don't know. I see: he left the Ouakers and so isn't down in their books. The 'whys' and 'wherefores' needn't be discussed."

Robert stood up, when he reached his wise conclusion, and gave his coat a gentle shake and kicked at nothing, first with one foot and then with the other; an ordeal that rearranged his physical self and seemed to have a soothing effect upon his mentality, for he certainly was

himself again to the average observer, but his newly assumed equanimity was destined to receive a shock.

- "Say, stranger, any luck up there?"
- "What do you mean?"

"Bless my stars, stranger, no offence. I see you get up from under that tree and thought you'd been testin' the quality of the feed from up there." And the tramp pointed to the Ridgeley house.

It was rather hard to be taken for a tramp, and for a moment Robert was not quite sure whether he was angry or not. Then the funny side of the whole affair struck him rather forcibly, and he was prepared to carry out the joke.

"Well, no," he replied, "I didn't get what I went after, that's a fact."

"What you givin' us? Did you get that toggery up there, with hat and boots thrown in for good measure, and then go back on 'em that way."

Robert laughed to himself, and then said, "You were talking about food, not clothes. I didn't get anything to wear

up there or to eat either, for that matter."

"You're about right," said the tramp, looking a little closer at Robert, and then added, "You ain't long on the road, that's sure, tricked out in that shape. I was off a little. Take it all back. No offence. Say, mister, could you spare a nickel?"

Robert stepped forward to hand the tramp a coin, when he perceived that the fellow had a companion who had been crouching in the weeds along the bottom of the fence. Immediately he drew back and prepared for a vigorous defence. These tramps, he saw, meant mischief.

"Say, stranger, don't go back on us that way. You meant to give me a tip, and where is it?" And saying this the fellow followed Robert's retreating footsteps, and at the same time the other tramp stood up.

Robert's cane was a poor weapon for such a time and, most unfortunately, he had no pistol. At best, he could but

keep the tramps off for a short time only if they really meant robbery, for the chances were, of course, that some wagon would be passing, and they would strike vigorously, if they struck at all. That somebody would pass was his one hope, and all he could now do was to assume a bold front, which has often accomplished more than a weapon.

"Say, feller, shell out a few 'fore somebody comes, or we'll have to help you a bit. No offence." And the spokesman tramp now showed the villain in his face.

The two were ready at a word spoken by either to rush upon him, as he plainly saw, and his safety lay wholly in his pluck. With a motion of drawing a pistol from his pocket, he said, coolly, "Come on," and so perfectly was it all acted that the tramps drew back. Unarmed themselves, they had hoped he was. A moment was gained, and, as it proved, was all that was needed. A rattle of wheels was heard; and Robert

looked up and down the road, but saw no vehicle approaching. Then, recognizing the direction of the sound, he looked quickly behind him, and to his intense embarrassment saw Miss Ridgeley in a little pony cart. Two on the defensive instead of one, he thought, but his fears were groundless. The mere presence of another person, though a young woman, was sufficient to make cowards of the tramps, and they ran away with all possible speed.

"I have an engagement," said Miss Ridgeley, when she drove up, "and am late now. How fortunate that I came just at this time, for I seem to have frightened those tramps off! Had they attacked you?"

"They were about to, I believe," replied Robert. "But really, are you not afraid to drive alone with such brutes about?"

"Not to ride about in the daytime, no, along this road; but the fellows are getting to be too numerous for comfort. My brother had some words with one

of them yesterday, and now he's afraid the barn will be set on fire."

"I am certainly," said Robert, "greatly indebted to you for your timely presence, Miss Ridgeley, and now, as the coast is clear, think I had better hasten towards Riverside. Really, to be attacked by highwaymen and rescued by a lady is extremely dramatic for these later days of prose and extreme artificiality. It is like living centuries ago to have such an adventure."

"It is like living in the country," replied Miss Ridgeley, with some show of spirit. "We have the objectionable feature of the tramp, it is true, but that is a product of the city thrust upon us; the timely deliverance from danger is a native product."

"Goodness gracious! Miss Ridgeley, you seem to think I'm to be pitied because I came from the city!" exclaimed Robert, feeling more hurt than if a tramp had struck him.

"I do," she replied, with marked emphasis. "I think the city cramps men's

energies more than it expands them. Exceptions, of course, are in multifold abundance, but——"

- "But I am not one of them?" interrupted Robert.
- "No personal applications of general conversation, please. Come, now, Mr. Atwood, to make amends I will give you room in my cart and take you to Riverside, if you wish."
- "You are very kind, but your engagement calls you in another direction, I think you said."
- "Oh, I can get up some excuse, and it is not very important, anyway," Miss Ridgeley replied, feeling a little confused.
- "And is that a commendable country characteristic?" asked Robert, with a provoking smile, for it was too good an opportunity to defend what he would call city honesty.
- "No, it is not commendable, but I do not pose as a perfect specimen of a country girl. You appear not to have been very much marred by a city life,

I will keep my engagement, then, as you wish; so, good-morning." And, just touching Toby with the whip, she whirled away and left Mr. Atwood to walk to Riverside.

CHAPTER V

THE HERMIT'S SOLILOQUY

TT is not strange that, after such an experience as his interview with Atlanta Guthrie, the hermit should have been ill at ease. The quiet of his many years spent in this cabin, the consideration shown him by his landlord and the few educated neighbors, had made his sojourn a pleasant one. By the ignorant element he was not much annoyed because of their fear. Only recently he had been heard to say, "There is something better than supernatural knowledge, and that is an abundance of good common sense. The uneducated, superstitious work-people about here think I am in league with the whole host of imps that throng the shadows. loft of my cabin is a choice assortment of ghosts, according to their views.

There's one good thing about it,—this condition of their minds keeps me well rid of the sight of their bodies." Children naturally were afraid to come near, and had a well-established danger-line that encircled the cabin, and this they never passed. The hermit thought it best not to disabuse their minds. So, except upon rare occasions, he had the woods practically to himself, so far as mankind was concerned, and with Pudge, and all the wild-life that found shelter there, was happy.

Here was an instance where man shared Nature's bounty with the varied forms of life, and sought nothing that was fatal to another's interest. The hermit often smiled when his eye rested upon the worthless old gun that hung above the mantel-shelf. It was there when he moved into the cabin, and he had never even so much as taken it down. The occasional stranger that had called had sometimes gone away thinking the hermit was a hunter. He truly was, but only in such peaceful fashion

his game loved him for the interest he took in their affairs.

The immediate vicinity of the cabin was not an uncared-for wilderness of The thistle and stramonium weeds did not encroach upon the path to the spring, nor dock and knot-weed crowd the tender grass. The choicest of Nature's near-by products had been gathered with discrimination and lovingly cared for. From the woods, at various times, specimens of the rarer shrubs had been brought and planted within sight of his door. So far, he had his flower-garden, and there seemed always to be a bird for every bush; and never was ground more cleanly cultivated than where his few vegetables grew. Even this spot was not fenced against intruders. The hermit shared his berries with his birds, and there was enough for all.

The peewees came in early spring directly to the projecting ledge above his door, and never a summer that the nest was not occupied. They did not

hesitate to enter the cabin, and were not disturbed by his passing to and fro. The wrens had their nesting-box nailed to the wood-shed, and these restless midgets had the freedom of all the hermit's belongings. In and out of doors were alike to them. Wheresoever they wished to go, they went. Let and hinderance were unknown to them. bluebirds nested in their own home. fastened to the cabin's sentinel oak, and there was never a quarrel between them and the wrens. Did they know the hermit would not permit it? The songsparrow nested with like regularity in a rose-bush that grew against the cabin. and they found daily, upon the windowsill near by, food sufficient to their The tall tree, that was long known as the "sentinel oak." was known to many an oriole and restless vireo that often lived among its branches all the summer, and soon learned that the hermit was their friend. The whippoorwill rested during the day within the shadow of the cabin, and sang so constantly at

night, one wonders how the hermit ever slept. The chipmunks crossed the threshold, fearless of Pudge, and climbed the hermit's table seeking crumbs; and squirrels, red and gray, and their flying cousin that goes forth at night, all, at times, scampered across the roof, or, entering by a window with its single broken pane, rattled the goodly store of nuts that lay upon the loft-floor.

As the sun rose, day after day, unless a tempest raged, the hermit left his cabin and walked slowly to the spring. Here he bathed: here he caught the first sounds of the returning day; here he greeted the solemn oaks he had learned to love so well; here was his chapel, and at this most fitting hour he was free from earth, earthy, and heartily devout. Then was the hermit ready to meet the requirements of the day, and these were the care that he gave to all such guests as happened to be present; not men or women, but the ever-blessed birds, the squirrels, mice, or whatsoever creature crossed his path. He would caress a

snake as a mother might her infant, and talked to a turtle or a toad, as if these creatures comprehended all he said and returned an intelligent reply. Be this as it may, wild-life certainly understood him, and he it. It may seem to the uninitiated, and probably does, like childish prattle to talk with unreasoning creatures, but the hermit found it as entertaining, as he had been heard to say, "as talking to unreasonable men." But is wild-life unreasoning? Have they no abstract idea of liberty? Is life with them a mere matter of routine: eating and sleeping? The Pemberton forest was sacredly guarded against intrusion by gunner or mischievous, nest-robbing boys. Its owner was a crank, and his crankiness was a whim to preserve a tract of primeval forest, at least as long as he lived. Only windfall wood was removed, and here wild-life demonstrated that existence, for it, was something more than food, shelter, and perpetuation of species. It has been said, "It may be doubted whether, if the food-

supply were plentiful and constant, animals or birds would ever care to move beyond the circle in which they can find enough for their daily wants;" and again, "The adventurous life, if it is to be found among wild creatures, belongs to the carnivorous animals: vet most of these are naturally indolent, and active from necessity." Wild-life in the Pemberton woods contradicts this author. Birds are not restless in appearance because forever seeking food, but often because bubbling over with a spirit of fun, for on no other ground can vou explain their games of hide-and-seek, and surely swallows, when racing high in mid-air, half a dozen abreast, are not then seeking food or exercising to arouse an appetite. There's not a bird but knows the meaning of fun as well as does any child, and I am half tempted to go further and add, has a sense of humor. And the same may be said of our smaller mammals. There is not one that does not move around far beyond food-getting limits. There was not a

squirrel in the hermit's cabin but was too fat for its own good, and were they not ever up to mischief? Was there no spirit of adventure, pure and simple, in the chipmunk that leaped from the sill of the open window and sat bolt upright on the table, looking at the hermit, and then with a squeak bounded out of the cabin through the door-way, scampered around the house and repeated the visit? It was no hide-and-seek or tag, in this case, with one of its own kind, but an offer to play either game with the hermit himself. These creatures all knew that he was their friend. They accepted him as one of them. These little wood-gods well repaid his love and granted him the freedom of their state. No creature can be called a mere machine, living a monotonous routine of food-getting and slumber, that has wit enough to discriminate between a man who becomes sincerely one with them, and the brute that takes a fiendish pleasure in their sufferings. Because, here in the Pemberton woods, every

creature had its natural enemy there was no evidence of, no, nor existence of, a constant state of nervous dread. mice were happy notwithstanding the weasel was lurking in hollow trees or among their roots; but keen-eyed, keennosed healthy mice are armed by the knowledge of their danger, and consider it so carefully that the matter is minimized, and they are wise enough to determine to eat, drink, and be merry until the enemy comes. Man does not forever moan that sooner or later he must die, but lives as best he can until death appears. Mice know nothing of what we call natural death; it is replaced by fear of an enemy, and while they outwit it, they are happy as the day is long.

A beautiful day in May was fast drawing to a close. The sun was well behind the tree-tops, and only narrow bands of golden light streaked the little lawn that extended on all sides of the cabin. The faint evening breeze gently stirred the tree-top, but passed by with-

out stopping to cool the hermit's brow. The day had been warm, and now, seated in his easy-chair upon the grass, he was ready, as the last act of the day, to chirp a few cheery messages to the birds about him: for these came as promptly to his call as a farmer's chickens follow the dairy-maid. He chirped and whistled, and with a hollowed reed made curious sounds that brought every wren and sparrow and the thrushes close about. He spoke to them in their own language, as it were, and they replied to his kindly inquiries by their sweetest songs. The melancholy thrush, the exultant grosbeak, the impetuous cardinal, the chattering wren, and neverresting swallows joined in a chorus that was sweet assurance that with birds, if not elsewhere, he was among his friends.

But the light was fading fast. The birds had one by one retired, and still the hermit and his ever-faithful Pudge remained. In the swamps the toads were calling lustily; the frogs were ring-

ing their rejoicings by the spring; there was an unbroken hum of insect-life in every tree and among the fresh new blades of grass; all a fitting background for a hermit's retrospective train of thought. The ever-varying volume of these voices of the night accorded well with the manifold character of the old Now fear, now hope, man's emotions. now wondering if the foe might not be outwitted, now sinking into the depths He did not move nor of despair. speak until well into the night, when the moon rose above the tree-tops and chased the gloomy shadows from the lawn. Then taking up again his homemade flute or whatsoever we may call it. he played a wild, sweet, wandering, whispering tune, as if calling to the shadows to return.

Then laying the quaint instrument on the grass, the hermit rose partly from his chair, and reseating himself in a new position, said, in a very serious way, that showed how full of meaning was every word, "Pudge, the old days are over."

Pudge raised his head and replied by a slight whimpering sound.

"And there's no place to move to that I dare venture upon. I'm growing old. Pudge, we're growing old. Such a thought hasn't crossed my mind of late, but that woman has made me realize it with a vengeance. Go live with her! Pudge, when we go live with her there'll be no other shelter for us this side of the moon."

Pudge rapped his tail upon the grass in approbation of that decision.

"What troubles me is that she may come again to talk of jewels and money. It's ill-luck, Pudge, but our good old days are over."

Pudge came to the hermit that he might see him more distinctly, and sitting before him, looked directly in his face.

"Yes, Pudge, I mean it. The good old days are over."

Pudge barked in a strange, snappy way, clearly expressive of dissent. The dog would not believe it.

Rising up and stretching his arms and legs, the hermit first picked up the whistle he had made long ago and cherished beyond price, and then lifted the chair into the cabin. As he seldom did, this night he lit his candle and sat at his table writing for some time. The small sheets of pale-green paper, one after another, were pushed aside, and, after a full half-dozen had been covered with closely written lines, the hermit leaned back in his chair and gave a sigh of intense relief. A pen was never popular with him, and now that his hand trembled it was a good deal less so.

After a moment's rest, the sheets were folded and placed in an envelope, and this was carefully directed. Then, looking up, he said, "I hate to have an errand, Pudge, except deeper into the woods, but we must take this." And holding up the letter, Pudge barked and stood up, for, wise dog that he was, he well knew it meant a walk to the nearest farm-house, and Pudge, unlike his

master, had not outgrown a taste for the peopled world.

Then all was quiet save the mingled voices of the night, and these do not, when we are weary, always disturb the silence, but intensify it. There in the darkness were the hermit and his dog. the former indulging in revery, the latter asleep; and it was not long before the half-wakeful revery passed to profound slumber; but it was not wholly undisturbed: an occasional half-uttered word showed that the old man was dreaming; and when the witchery of midnight stirred the owl to livelier hooting, and the toads called and called back in more stentorian tones, the hermit suddenly awoke.

Looking about the dimly lighted room, and so assuring himself of where he was, he said, in no undertone,—

"Was the woman lying? No; that can scarcely be. But how could I have been followed all these years, and by Ada's orders? Why did she never seek to open communication if she knew my

whereabouts? Have I not been always thoroughly disguised? Does anybody but one man in town know anything of importance? and he knows only my assumed name. Yet, here comes this scheming woman and calls me what for vears I have not called myself. If the secret is out, then truly the pleasant days have passed and this visit is the beginning of the end. It is too bad. too bad! But I have been fortunate to live in quiet until now, and the sands of life must be nearly done trickling. said too much to that keen-witted survevor when he passed by in the summer. He said people were not only curious about their neighbors,-I learned this years ago, to my sorrow,-but often persistently so, and the world was too small to keep oneself hidden for a lifetime. He was not speaking idly. he been ferreting out my history? looked as if he knew it. Well. Pudge. ill or well the day, I must have some rest before I face to-morrow." And the hermit relit his candle and retired.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE RÔLE OF REPORTER

WHEN he reached the city, Robert Atwood dined at his club and was late in getting home,—all of which was previously planned on his part, and wholly turned out to his satisfaction, for he was thoroughly averse to recounting the adventures of the day so soon after their ending. He felt that he could take a calmer view of the whole affair later, as at the breakfast-table, if there were only his sister and mother present to hear him. Certainly there was a good deal he might say that he did not wish the servants to overhear.

It is not strange that the unusual incidents should have made a rather deep impression, and all night long Robert Atwood dreamed in an exasperating way about highwaymen, a pretty girl, a

lane with an ever-receding gate, and one big cloud that at times swooped down and shut him in from the world. The latter was the discovery of the fly in the ointment. But as the morning drew on apace, the irritating entanglement was made smooth and flawless. Everybody and every place was as he would have them, and Robert awoke feeling abundantly refreshed and at peace with all mankind. At the close of all his troubles in dream-land he had been cheered by the winsome glances of a charming girl, and, awaking, he could have shaken hands with the tramps who had sought to rob him.

It was not strange, therefore, that he felt in a communicative humor when he sat at the breakfast-table, and a little disappointed to find himself alone. The waitress poured his coffee and retired, and being, while he sipped it, in a reminiscential mood, was quite indifferent to the news of the day. The newspaper was but aimlessly glanced over, and Cuba might have swallowed Spain and

Congress permanently disappeared and he not noticed even the startling head-Breakfast was not with him an important meal, and to-day the family seemed to have forgotten that such an event ever occurred at the beginning of the day. His sister, at least, he thought might have put in an appearance to hear But, as it turned out, before his news. Robert was ready to leave the table his sister did appear, and instantly commenced a long series of questions, never pausing for a reply to any one of them; and while her impatience was increasing and her replies to the waitress rather confusing, accepting butter and declining bread. Mrs. Atwood also came and took her place at the head of the table.

"As I see you are provided, my son," remarked his mother, in her cold, unsympathetic way, "I will not ask you to be helped; and, while drinking mine, am ready to listen to your account of yesterday; and, Helen, please let your brother tell his story in his own way."

"But, mother, he is so slow, and I'm just dying to know all about——"

"All about what, sis? You monkey, you don't know now what I went after."

"I do, too. To find out about Greatgrandfather Bloomfield," replied Helen, with an air of importance and of confidence in her knowledge.

"You're right. Well, he was at loggerheads with the Riverside Quakers and got fired; so there's nothing about him." And Robert was pleased to find that a great deal of his report could be squeezed into a few words.

"Oh, how mean!" exclaimed Helen.

"Worse than that, Nell, he wasn't anybody to build on. Be a Revolutionary dame on somebody else's account." And then Robert kicked himself, under the table, fearing he had said too much.

"Whom can I build on, then?" she asked.

"I don't know. Wasn't there an Atwood in way-back times?"

"I don't know," pouted Helen; "and

I think it's awful mean. What did that woman tell you?"

"'That woman,' as you call her, told me what I've told you already. But don't be so snippy as to 'that woman.' Why, Nell, she's a trump; and say, mother, do you know the Ridgeleys?"

"I have met them," Mrs. Atwood replied, "but it was years ago. Your father and I occasionally went over to Riverside just after we were married, but somehow we drifted apart. They are quite plain people, you know, and not quite congenial."

"'Plain people!' Well, mother, that sounds just on a par with Nell's 'that woman.' Now, let me tell you something; there's a freshness, a piquancy, so to speak, that I found perfectly delightful. Don't you know, about a month ago, there were children along the street with little bunches of pink arbutus for sale? Now, that's my favorite flower, and I was always bringing fresh bunches home with me, for it always seems like a gift of the gods when

it comes into town; and that is just how I feel about Miss Ridgeley—and her mother, too. They made me positively ashamed of the humdrum, do-nothing, languid women that crowd the shops and even the men off the pavements sometimes. Chatter, chatter, chatter, and nothing said! Miss Ridgeley said a good deal, and not one syllable was nonsense." And Robert gave a look of defiance at his audience, expecting to be attacked for this vigorous defence of plain country folk.

"Goodness me! Bobby, what's the matter? What has happened to make you talk just like—well, just as though you knew something?"

Mrs. Atwood laughed at her daughter's uncomplimentary speech, and suggested that Robert probably had better continue with his story. Doubtless it would all come out in time and needed no interrupting criticism.

"Mother," said Robert, when she ceased speaking, "I couldn't have been more cordially entertained. There was

no effort on their part to be polite, entertaining, and appreciative of my errand and its sombre ending. Why, that girl wouldn't be flustered if the Czar of Russia called——"

"Because you are so much like a tyrant yourself you say this?" asked his sister.

"Your mother told you not to interrupt."

"Oh, bother! What's she like?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell. She has brown hair and blue eyes; is a good height, and full-figured without being stout. Don't ask about dress; there I'm stuck; only I know she had on collar and cuffs that set off the dark color."

"You are not very definite, my son; suppose you skip all reference to dress," said Mrs. Atwood.

"Well, I've told you all; unless you desire to know that she has tapering fingers, and there's not a freckle on her nose, and such a set of teeth! They glisten like——"

"Diamonds?" asked Nelly.

"Well, no, not that, but they showed they were white and regular, and such a neck!"

"Goodness me, Bob, you've tumbled head over heels in love with Miss Ridgeley. Now's my chance to pay you back a bit for teasing me."

"It's nothing of the kind, Nell, and I'm talking to mother——"

"And I'm listening, please. Don't forget that," retorted his sister.

"I'm not likely to; and, mother, there was the same snap in her talk that there is in the air when there's been a white frost. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but it was all so clean cut and just the proper thing, and every word spoken with her big blue eyes looking right at you. Hang it if I ever met such a girl!" And Robert leaned back in his chair, feeling he had acquitted himself admirably as the champion of one, if not all country girls.

"He's dead gone; isn't that what they say, mother? Bob's dead gone on a country lass. Isn't that a pretty pass?

Goodness me, there's a rhyme! And say, mother, must I be bridesmaid? Dear me, just to think of all that's come of Bob's going to Riverside!" And Nell only stopped exclaiming for want of breath.

"Will you ever be quiet?" fairly shouted Robert, getting a little red in the face and seeing no fun in his sister's teasing.

Before the threatened outbreak resulted seriously Mrs. Atwood remarked, "You seem, my son, to have been so impressed with those whom you met that the purpose of the visit was overlooked."

Robert flushed when he resented this unwarranted suggestion; for he had not left anything undone, as he knew. "Not at all," he replied; "I learned at the very outset that there was nothing to be ascertained from that source, and there was no other to turn to that I was aware of. What more could I do than ask a question, receive the reply, and take my leave?"

"Your visit was long enough, from your own account, to have made a very

strong impression," replied Mrs. Atwood, as she rose to leave the table. "I'm sorry Nelly is disappointed."

"Oh, I don't mind, if I can get in some other way; and I want to hear more about this girl. Haven't you more to tell, Bob?"

"Not now, sis; and I don't think mother is quite fair with me. By the bye, she's our third cousin," remarked Robert, and then smiled, for the thought restored him to good humor.

"Third cousin? How does she come in third?" asked Helen, with mock or real surprise. "How third, when there's lots of Atwoods to count up and that horrid Atlanta Guthrie down South; she's some sort of cousin, mother says?"

"Oh, I didn't mean third in importance—"

"You would say first, wouldn't you?" And Nell looked up very archly at her brother.

"Shut up! I mean that's the degree of relationship, and cousins are recognized or not, just as you see fit."

"The degree ?" exclaimed Nell, with a look of despair. "Well, it's too deep for me, this relationship business. Did she tell you?"

"Yes," replied Robert; "how else could I have found it out, unless mother knows all about it, and I suspect she does?"

"Why?"

"Oh, from her manner more than anything else."

While thus engaged in conversation and playing with empty cups, the waitress brought the morning mail, and Robert picked from the salver a dainty envelope addressed to himself and postmarked Riverside.

He was not long in opening it and read with genuine interest,—

DEAR MR. ATWOOD,—About two miles from where we live there is an old man, living alone in a cabin in the woods, who can, my brother thinks, give you some information concerning your ancestor, Marmaduke Bloomfield.

Very truly,

ALICE RIDGELEY.

5th mo. 10, 1896.

"Where's mother?" asked Robert, with much interest indicated by tone and manner.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied his sister, looking much surprised. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing," Robert replied, and hastily left the room.

"Funny," said Helen to herself; "I'll follow."

Robert found his mother in the library, and handed her the note he had just received.

Mrs. Atwood read it attentively, and then said, as she returned it, "Miss Ridgeley seems very interested in your quest."

"Mother, you're not fair," exclaimed Robert, with some show of impatience. "The girl is a natural, accommodating, sensible one, one entirely too self-respecting and level-headed to make a fool of herself or let me make one of myself. Just as I begin to get interested in this matter, for Nell, you throw cold water on the whole business."

"I hardly think you address your mother in a proper spirit. You certainly do seem extremely well posted as to Miss Ridgeley's characteristics, seeing you have met her but the once." And Mrs. Atwood picked up her paper, as if to resume her reading.

"Oh, pshaw, mother! what's the matter? Because I happen to meet, by mere chance, somebody positively new to my experience in way of humanity, you think I'm 'gone,' as Nell says. That's rubbish. I don't suppose you've any objection to a son, thirty-odd years old, hunting up this old man in the woods and perhaps finding out what I want to know. So far as I can tell, there's a fly in the ointment,—this old Marmaduke wasn't married at all."

"Did Miss Ridgeley give you this information?" asked Mrs. Atwood, looking up with some interest in her countenance as to her son's reply.

"She was forced to leave me to infer it. Did you ever hear father say anything about his Jersey history?"

"Nothing of importance," Mrs. Atwood replied, and again took up her paper.

"Well," said Robert, after a pause, "I've nothing much to do, and as extreme age has an uncertain hold on life, I'll go see this old man without delay."

"And write to Miss Ridgeley with equal promptness?" asked Mrs. Atwood, in a very irritating way.

"Does not the note require acknowledgment?" Robert asked.

"I suppose it does, briefly," replied his mother, with a trace of emphasis on the last word. "But," she continued, "it hardly calls for continued correspondence on ancestral topics."

"Oh, I guess not. Mother, you're in a strange mood this morning; but do get the notion out of your head that I am in love."

"I sincerely wish you were," she replied, without looking up.

"Sincerely wish that I was. Oh, with the pink and white demoiselle from Baltimore. No, mother, never that."

And Robert left the library, and as he went to his own room to dress for a stroll down town, he muttered to himself, "I'd give half my fortune, if I had a big one, if I'd never seen that Baltimore party. Good gracious! I'm not so citified, as Miss Ridgeley would call it, as to suppose everything centres in a pile of dollars. There are some things money cannot buy." And Robert glanced at himself in the mirror as he said these last words, as though he was the author of that threadbare but very questionable assertion.

CHAPTER VII

AT POVERTY CROSS

ATURE, of which we hear so much and about which we know so little, had been niggardly of her gifts at There were sand and Poverty Cross. small pebbles that turned a cold shoulder to every weed, or shrub, or tree that had the hardihood to encroach upon its The few scattered oaks and a bounds. single cedar wore a look of desperation that showed their lives depended upon their pluck, which was well-nigh exhausted; and how mankind had proved equal to the struggle for existence at this woe-begone spot was a knotty problem. Yet there were people hereabouts, and they had been known to laugh upon occasion; though this statement is given merely on hearsay evidence.

Robert Atwood did not believe such a thing possible. Never before had he

seen anything so like a desert, except from the car's window in the far West: but that was desolation he anticipated, and it seemed all right, but here was something worse, for Poverty Cross was surrounded by land flowing with milk and honey. Yet, as he found, people lived here, and lived too, or some of them, to a good old age. Here, for example, was Joel Bostwick, contented if not gleeful, and still sturdy if not vouthfully active: almost an octogenarian, with a glib tongue that, when not quickened by fancy rather than memory, proved of value to those historically inclined.

Robert Atwood found the city intolerably dull. Nothing that he heard or saw withdrew his thoughts from recent events; so, the day following his rather unsatisfactory discussion with his mother, he started in an early train for Riverside by a direct route, having no fancy to be again victimized by that fool of a ferryman.

97

Not finding Mr. Ridgeley in his office, he sought information elsewhere, and armed with what directions the clerk gave, he departed, on foot, and quite prepared now for any number of tramps. But he did not immediately find the old man mentioned in Miss Ridgeley's note. The clerk had directed him to Joel Bostwick, whom he did find, and to this link between the past and the present Robert introduced himself, and then asked, "Can you tell me anything of my great-grandfather that lived about here, the late Marmaduke Bloomfield?"

"Like enough I kin, mister. But what do you mean by calling him 'late'? He was never late when it came to lookin' after his own, as I kin remember," replied Joel, with a bewildered look.

"Oh, I mean, now dead," explained Robert.

"I see; but, young man, he died a goodish while ago, and not lately. Let's see, I'm seventy-four come nex' month,

and he's bin dead more'n sixty year, and he was younger when he died a good deal than I am now. I was only a shaver then; figger'n' it out, I was, let's see, about fifteen——"

"You were thirteen," said Robert, correcting the old man.

"Thirteen, was it? Anyway, I was big enough to be knowin' better, and got many a strappin' fur stayin' too long in Uncle Marm's orchard. You don't see sech apples as his'n was."

"Was he your uncle?" asked Robert, with much surprise.

"No. Uncle Marm Bloomfield was folks and I'm only common."

"Oh!" exclaimed Robert, with a feeling of decided relief; and then he added, "Marmaduke Bloomfield wasn't rich, so far as I ever heard."

"Like enough he wasn't, but there was a way about him as good as havin' money. He just held his head up and looked everybody square in the eye. We boys thought he owned the whole country. But, as I remember, he sort

o' wilted down, sudden-like, and afore he died used to walk up and down his garden patch back o' the house a-swingin' his cane round as if he'd like to hit somebody. It was a'ter his boys and gal left him fur the city, and only come back now and then on a visit. His wife had been dead some time, and toward the last he lived alone, till the neighbors stepped in when he was took to his bed. My mother was in the room when he died, and all he said fur days was, 'What a fool I was!' I've heard mother tell of it often."

- "Do you remember his wife?" Robert asked, becoming much interested in all he heard.
- "No; I was too young for that," Joel replied.
 - "Do you know who she was?"
- "Nor that neither. Mother said she wasn't from 'round here, and that she made the racket with his father."
- "And why did his children leave him?" asked Robert, with some hopes that later events could be recalled.

"'Cause he was so cranky, I've heard. You see, their mother kep' the family together, and a'ter her time there was no peace. Leastwise, so I've heard old folks say. They're all gone now from 'round here o' that name."

"Didn't any of his children come here when he died?" asked Robert, feeling that he was unearthing matters that had far better remain buried, but somehow his curiosity was roused to the highest pitch, though family history had never before interested him a particle, but was a subject for ridicule when mentioned by others, thinking that American aristocracy rests on a rather flimsy foundation.

"One of his sons came that lived in the city and took away some things and gave the rest to the neighbors. It's a cur'us thing. About a week after the funeral the house took all ablaze sudden one night and burned to ashes. Some say that Marm Bloomfield came back and did it himself. The land lay idle for years, and then some one bought

it, and now it's a part of the farm adjoinin'."

"Aren't you a Bloomfield, somehow, or some of your people?" asked Robert, for he somehow had such an idea from what he had fancied of the old man mentioned in Miss Ridgeley's note, and so far he had received no very important information.

"Me a Bloomfield?" exclaimed Joel Bostwick, in surprise. "Not that I know of. Mother never said so."

"Why do some people call you the Hermit?" asked Robert, trying in that way to lead the conversation in new directions.

"Call me a varmint? Who?"

Robert had a hard time to keep his face straight while trying to explain. "I say," he repeated, "are you the man they call the Hermit, who lives in some woods near here?"

"Oh, I see," replied Joel; "I see. No; you've struck the wrong man this time. I'm old, but I live as near like other folks as a poor man can. Him

you mean lives in the Pemberton woods. He's off in his head, they do say, if they don't think he'll hear 'em. I guess you won't find out much from him. He ain't talkin' to nobody but his dog. So you took me for him all along. Well, that's a good one!' And the old man laughed heartily at Robert's mistake.

"All right; and it was a good mistake to make. You've told me a good deal; and how far is it to those Pemberton woods?"

"Go yonder to the cross-roads and turn to your left, and then first turn to your right and you'll see 'em. All big trees. You'll see the house among 'em when you get there. It's near about two miles."

With these simple directions to guide him, Robert bade the old man goodmorning and started, without the buoyancy of hope to cheer him, on a hot, sunny walk of two miles over Jersey sands. Just vaguely, at odd moments, he thought of the shady side of Chestnut Street, and visions of easy-chairs in

the lounging-rooms of the Exclusive Club flitted across him; but he was not without pluck, as he wished Miss Ridgeley to know, and trudged on without so much as a thought about a noonday lunch.

CHAPTER VIII

ATLANTA GUTHRIE ARRIVES

X /ITH an aigrette and other feathers that made members of the Audubon Society grieve, and every dainty quality of dress that fashion could devise, Helen Atwood, at eleven A.M., was about leaving the door-step of her father's house, when her attention was called, she knew not why, to a carriage that seemed to be approaching the spot where she stood; and so, without actually halting, she delayed her steps, wondering if somebody was coming to their house, and, if so, who could it be? The carriage was evidently a hired one,-the horses and driver showed that. Helen was right in her supposition. The carriage did stop in front of her father's door, and when the driver opened the door for the occupant, to Helen's utter dismay, the distant cousin,—whom she

hoped would always remain at a distance,—Miss Atlanta Guthrie, stepped down to the pavement, and, handing the driver his fee, rushed tumultuously upon Helen, kissed her effusively, and exclaimed, "Oh, I am so delighted to see you! How you have grown! I am nearly dead travelling. Did you get my telegram?"

Helen felt as if a whirlwind had tossed her about, and was entirely too perturbed mentally and disarranged exteriorly to care whether Miss Guthrie had a reply or not. One thing was certain, she was no longer in condition to take her morning walk. After a moment's awkward silence, she replied, curtly, "No; I have heard of no telegram. We did not know of your coming. Where did you come from?"

Atlanta Guthrie was no fool. She saw, on the moment, that Helen Atwood was not pleased at such display of affection on her part, and realized that they were really strangers. All this in an instant, and, changing her tactics

to others lacking all demonstration, said, with a sweet smile that changed her whole appearance, "Oh, from home,—from Atlanta; all the way without change of cars, and so tired."

"Then do come in and rest yourself before you continue on your journey," replied Helen, with a wicked look that Atlanta did not fail to notice.

"'Rest before I continue on my journey,'" repeated Atlanta, somewhat taken aback for the moment. "Why, my dear, I've come all this distance to make you a visit, and you don't seem much pleased with the idea." And Atlanta pouted just enough to look very sorry and ready to cry.

"Oh, this is so sudden," remarked the cold-hearted Helen, quoting a stock phrase of old-time novelists, and then she laughed, and Atlanta looked relieved and laughed, too, as they passed into the house. Arm in arm, like loving friends, they went back to the library, and Helen sent by the waitress a message to her mother announcing Miss Atlanta Guth-

rie's arrival, and almost immediately Mrs. Atwood appeared, and, to Helen's infinite surprise, she received her cousin with great cordiality,—so much surprised, indeed, that she exclaimed, "Why, mother, you never mentioned Cousin Atlanta's coming! Did you get her telegram?"

"Is her coming not the more pleasant because a surprise, dear?" asked her mother, and, without waiting for her daughter's reply, turned to Atlanta and said, "You must be tired and hungry; come with me." And they left the room together.

Helen Atwood very visibly stamped her foot upon the thick fringe of a rug beneath it, and then, giving the rug and its fringe a spiteful little kick, turned about, with pouting lips, saying, "I'll not stop to see who's in the next carriage, but keep right on." And so she did, wondering, all the while she was walking down Chestnut Street and back again what was the real state of affairs

as to this half-mysterious Atlanta Guthrie, and how would her brother like her being tagged on to them all summer long. The last thing she said to herself, on re-entering the house, was, "I hope papa will kick, but I'm afraid he won't."

While Helen was on her morning rounds her mother and Atlanta were sitting in Mrs. Atwood's room, and that lady was listening with much apparent—and probably real—interest to the visitor's story.

"My mother," she said, "has taken lodgings for the summer with some of her old friends in the mountains of Georgia, and so I had to be alone or go with her; and then I thought I would come North, as I want to consult a physician as to my greatly impaired nervous system. It is so trying to find that dear mother has not written. I wanted to write, but mother insisted that she should do it, and she wanted so much to hear from you all once more. I supposed, of course, she had, and you had

neglected to write right away or were away from home, so I telegraphed, and to think that even this should have gone astray!" And Atlanta, after all this, threatened to treat Mrs. Atwood to an hysterical scene, but the latter avoided it all by telling the polite lie that she was delighted she had come. That she had been on the point of inviting her, and now that she was here, would she please feel entirely at home until next fall at least, and let the doctor have plenty of time to completely renew her nerves?

Atlanta felt that she was now on firmer ground, but yet moved very cautiously. "Indeed, cousin," she said, "this is offering altogether too much. I can only, in good conscience, stay a short time, and ought to have gone to a hotel, but it is so dreary there when one is an invalid; but you don't know how thankful I am for a home-like shelter for a little while. I have never had, you know, a real home. Perhaps the doctor will not give me any hopes, and then I'll hurry back to mother and die in her

arms." And Atlanta choked a very little and tried very hard to force a tear into her eyes, but the long lashes remained dry in spite of her efforts.

"You shall do nothing of the kind," replied Mrs. Atwood, very firmly; "I am greatly in need of a companion, for I am, it seems, too old for my children, or they seem to think so. Helen's always on the go, and Robert off to his club, and you know Mr. Atwood's business keeps him out West or in Europe so much. So, really, you've come as if by the hand of Providence to protect me from the blues. So, now, let's talk Here you are and about other matters. here you shall stay, unless there is some young man in the question and he comes and carries you off."

"Some young man," repeated At-"Really, cousin, you're a regular lanta. tease. But that reminds me; how is Robert? It's years, you know, since I've seen him. He's about my age, I think: and not married vet?"

"He is a little older than you, and, III

like all young men with nothing to do, none the better for it. He cares for nothing after the novelty has worn off; and I do wish he would marry and settle down," replied Mrs. Atwood, with emphasis on every important word.

"Why, cousin," exclaimed Atlanta, "I should think you would want him home; you've said you were so lonely."

"But he's not company, I'm sorry to say. We don't agree on any subject. Of course he is attentive and all that. but he's a confirmed old bachelor, and that I do seriously object to; or was in that way of thinking, perhaps I should say, for only a day or two ago he went over into Jersey for Helen and saw a wonder in the way of a country girl: one of our country cousins, the Ridgeleys, and I shouldn't be surprised if he was over there now. He heard of an old man living in the woods over there who could tell him wonders, and perhaps he's gone to see him, but more likely the girl wrote only to get him to come there on some pretext or other."

Atlanta started up as if stung, and barely succeeded in suppressing a cry of pain. She walked to the window and looked out into the street, and then returned to her chair, and making no comment upon what Mrs. Atwood had said, complained of headache, and asked if she might lie down, for she did not wish any lunch. She hoped her trunks would soon come, that she might put on a wrapper.

Mrs. Atwood noticed that Atlanta now looked worried, and attributing it more to excitement of travel than anything she could have said, urged her to take a glass of wine and a biscuit. saving she would rest better than with an empty stomach, and probably her trunks would come very soon now. She had a double purpose in all this, for she had been planning for some time just where to put Atlanta, and could not quite determine between two rooms, either of which was available. While Atlanta was eating, not one, but half a dozen, biscuits and drinking, not sip-

113

ping, her second glass of wine, with a relish that suggested she had been fasting, the waitress announced the arrival of Miss Guthrie's luggage, and asked to what room it should be taken.

"To the third story front, to the left of the hall," replied Mrs. At-wood.

And it was not long before Atlanta entered the room assigned to her, and softly closing the door behind her, sat in an easy-chair by the window, and looking out at the Penn statue, which she now noticed for the first time, said, "Damn the cub's fancy for going to the Ridgeleys! I can only hope he hasn't been visiting my old man, or I'll have my hands more full than they are now. Damn!"

When Helen returned, her mother met her in the hall and said, "Nelly dear, our cousin Atlanta is not at all well and under the doctor's care, so please be very kind to her. I want her to stay here for a long time as a com-

panion. She can amuse me and be of help, too."

"Mother, she's no more ill than I am. I wish you'd seen her tumble all over me when she got out of the cab. She's nearly ruined my hat. Why, one of the girls said, 'Has one of the Audubon women been after you? Your aigrette's broken.' I don't like her, and you won't either for very long."

"Helen, dear, you are so impulsive. It was only her generous Southern nature that you misconstrue, or has Robert been prejudicing you for some reason of his own?"

"Why, mother, he never saw her, did he? Wasn't he away at school when she was here, years and years ago?"

"No, Helen, he was at home; but he might have his prejudices without having seen her. Young men are so queer."

"And so, too, mother, are some young women. As for Cousin Atlanta, give me Northern deliberation and unmussed hats in preference to Southern impulsiveness. I'd rather be frozen to

death than burnt to death. But, hang Atlanta! I mean, mother, I'll treat her properly. But where's Bob?"

"I think you exceed Atlanta in being impulsive, dear," replied Mrs. Atwood. "Robert has gone to Riverside again, I think; but really I do not know. He did not say."

"Well, he needn't bother about the matter," replied Helen, with her eyes "I've been to see Miss snapping. Krosscut at the Historical Society, and she says I can go in, on the Atwood side, through Joshua Wright, who was some sort of a something over in Jersey, and lots have wriggled in on his name. will do,' she said: 'but there's nothing to spare.' And the old thing actually laughed right in my face and said something about going in on a minimum basis, whatever that is. She's a horrid thing. All she cared for was to get her ten But I don't care. I'm in. and dollars. I want to see Bob and tell him all about it." And Helen started to go up to her room.

While this conversation was in progress, in the hall and library, Mrs. Atwood supposed that her invalid cousin was sound asleep, in the third-story room allotted to her, but it proved that she was not. The tinkle of the lunch-bell had reached her room and she had softly glided down to the second floor, and, finding the dining-room empty, continued noiselessly gliding to the floor below, and was within hearing but not in sight until the right moment, when she resumed gliding, and Mrs. Atwood and Helen saw Atlanta standing before them, her face wreathed in smiles, every trace of fatigue vanished, and wearing now a chic white dress that made Helen stare, it was so becoming. Atlanta did not offer to join in the conversation, but stood near until the Atwoods moved towards the dining-room. She followed, and while the three women were being seated both mother and daughter felt convinced that Atlanta had heard a great deal that was not intended for her ears. Mrs. Atwood inwardly vowed to be ex-

tremely careful in the future as to what she said, and Helen declared to herself, then and there, that she hated that woman.

CHAPTER IX

ROBERT ATWOOD MEETS THE HERMIT

ROBERT ATWOOD stopped when he reached the cool shade of the It had seemed like a grand old oaks. very long two miles, and he was now thoroughly hot, tired, and thirsty. He could press no button now and have a waiter bring him water, and he looked in every direction to see if there was a spring or pump where he could help himself. all events, he would get a little cooler before he started on, and he remembered, to his relief, the hermit must have water. As he sat, comparing his present surroundings with his usual ones in the city, he wondered what his club-men would say should they find him sitting here alone. He certainly did not care what they might think, knowing the character

of his errand, and while thus idly engaged he heard a voice, and, looking in the direction of the sound, saw an old man, and a very shaggy-coated dog of no particular breed trotting beside him. Knowing at a glance who it must be, he took the opportunity to scrutinize him closely before going forward and addressing him. There was nothing in the man's appearance to enable Robert to determine his age. He might not be more than sixty, and might be near a hundred. There was no senile tremor in his step, no trace of palsy in his arms, no effort to hold erect his head, and his white beard alone gave him a somewhat patriarchal look. Robert saw that he resembled, in some way, some person that he had seen before, but it was all His conclusion was that very vague. he had not another Joel Bostwick to deal with, but could not tell why he thought so.

The hermit and his dog passed by, and from neither had Robert received the slightest notice. They approached the

cabin, which he could barely make out from his point of view, by the path that Atlanta had taken on her visit, but no projecting tree-root troubled the hermit's foot. Robert watched them without moving until he was sure that the old man had reached the cabin door, and then he rose to follow.

Down the same path he passed quickly and knocked, as Atlanta had done, but there was no response. Again and louder he knocked, as if despairing of being received, and now the dog growled and the old man swung open the door and stood before his visitor. As he did so he said, in a voice trembling with impatience, if not anger, "What is it? Am I to be forever annoyed by strangers?"

"Though a stranger, sir, I hope you will recognize me for a moment while I state my errand," replied Robert.

"Recognize you?" said the hermit, with a sneer. "Young man, for years I have knocked at the door of Recognition, and it was not opened to me; so,

long since, I retraced my steps, and am happy now in the courts of Obscurity."

Robert was quite unprepared to hear any such remark when he addressed the hermit, and now opened his eyes in wonder when these strange words were quietly spoken by one whose appearance suggested anything but the use of choice language; not even a word clipped short or two run into one. had, as we have seen, been in doubt as to his reception, and at one time entertained but feeble hopes of acquiring any information. But fortune favored him. He realized that one secret of success is to recognize the value of particular moments. And now, seeing the hermit was disposed to talk, he forebore to ask questions, but aimed to draw the old man out and let him tell his own story as he would, if he would. His own purpose of visiting the hermit could well wait.

"You seem to have had an eventful life and not always to have lived here," finally remarked Robert, for the hermit

stood as if waiting for him to speak or retire.

"Your inference is in part correct, but I hardly suppose you would think my later years eventful. The country is probably quite stupid to you."

"Not at all. I like it. I live in it four months of the year," replied Robert, earnestly.

"Between May and October, I suppose," remarked the hermit, with some show of impatience, "when the sun is too hot at mid-day to tempt you out of doors, Asleep at night and drowsy half the day. There are many such people. Roused to a mild enthusiasm by a half-acre of color, but never to see the delicate tints of a single wayside flower. You look at the country from your carriage, and perhaps are more mindful of the gloss of your horse and harness than of the brilliancy of a midsummer sky." And the hermit laughed at the look of astonishment on Robert's face, for the young man felt that his past life was being critically read and his

future likely to be described in no flattering terms.

- "I really think you are pretty hard on a total stranger——"
- "And are you not equally hard on me? My time that you are taking is my most precious possession," interrupted the hermit with a snap of his bright eyes that showed he was firing a telling shot.
- "I hope you will pardon the intrusion. I desired to ask but a single question——"
- "And show no symptoms of asking it," again interrupted the old man, but without trace of impatience.
- "Before I do," said Robert, "let me ask, how do you know I am not a botanist or some learned naturalist?"
- "If you are, you are an excellent actor also. I saw you coming up the path, and you did not raise your eyes. Do botanists never cast a kindly glance at such old oaks as those, or smile—yes, smile—when they see flowers, be they ever so common? or does the naturalist

never stop when he hears a bird sing or a squirrel bark at him? or is it that you know the world only as so many dried specimens?" And the hermit's voice was full of contempt as he spoke the last word. "If this is true," he continued, "then you must think me an odd specimen." And the old man laughed merrily.

Was there ever such another? wondered Robert, when he found the hermit was waiting for a reply; and should he ask now about his ancestor or not? He would delay it, if he could, and said, "You are certainly very entertaining, and if I may venture so far, would say I should be glad to hear more of your life in this retired spot."

The hermit looked very searchingly at Robert, and was evidently not displeased with his manner or appearance. The young man certainly had, he thought, a legitimate errand, and deserved courteous treatment; and his earnestness was evident in that he had walked, apparently, from Riverside, or, was he staying with some of the neigh-

bors? At all events, I will see, concluded the hermit, if he be another Atlanta Guthrie or not.

"You say you are interested as to what my life here has been; and am I to infer that you suppose my previous life was too ordinary to be mentioned?" asked the hermit.

"You never could have been commonplace, under any circumstances." And by saying this he scored a point in his favor with the hermit.

"Let us be seated, here, in the shade of my sentinel oak, as I call it," said the hermit, and pointing to a rude artistic bench as he did so.

"Pardon me, sir, but may I have a drink of water?" asked Robert.

"Yonder is the spring," replied the hermit, pointing to it, and the path that led thereto.

Robert walked to it and soon satisfied his thirst; and as he did so the hermit watched him closely; and as Robert stood up again, having kneeled to reach

the water, the old man stared a little wildly and exclaimed, but in a low tone that was not overheard, "Is he another of the family, and sent by her?"

When Robert returned and had seated himself near the old man, the latter said, in a quiet way, "Now, young man, what is the nature of your errand?"

"A gentleman living in the neighborhood informed me that you might possibly give me some information concerning my great-grandfather, Marmaduke Bloomfield?"

"And why," asked the hermit, in reply, "did he suppose that I could do anything of the kind?"

"He did not state. I recently visited the young lady who has in her charge the records of the Riverside Quakers, and was told his marriage was not recorded there; that he was not in his later years, or from about that time, a member of their church."

"I knew him well," replied the hermit, sadly.

"You did?" asked Robert, excitedly.

"Then whom did he marry, and when? Can you tell me that? My sister wants to know so much."

"Your sister!" exclaimed the hermit, with some warmth. "Was the young woman who was here a day or two ago your sister?" And the old man stood up and resumed his usual forbidding frown and haughty manner.

"My sister here? No, never," replied Robert, equally surprised and a little excited. "Your visitor was probably Miss Ridgeley."

"No, no, I have seen her frequently; but let it go. I have been too little accustomed of late to visitors to conceal my real emotions. Let us be seated." And the hermit again sat down; and Robert changed his position a little so that he could the better see the old man while he was talking.

"You asked about Marmaduke Bloomfield," said the hermit. "He was not married, according to men's notions."

"But he had children, two sons and a daughter."

"You are right, and I am one of them." Then standing up again, he exclaimed, bitterly, "To think that after all these years I have made a fool of myself at last!"

"I do not understand you," said Robert, without leaving his seat.

The hermit turned and stood directly in front of Robert and asked, almost fiercely, "Young man, who are you?"

"Robert Atwood, of Philadelphia. My mother was Lucy Bloomfield and is the wife of Henry Atwood; and I am, it appears your grandnephew."

"You are," replied the hermit. "I see that you are speaking the truth, and how true it is that history repeats itself! The young woman that was here was my grandniece, Atlanta Guthrie."

"Atlanta Guthrie here!" exclaimed Robert. "Why, I thought she was down South, in Georgia."

"She has very recently been here," said the hermit, "and I fear intends to repeat her visits. Now, young man, I have not much to lose, but that little I

prefer to retain to the last. Can I trust you? It is a foolish question. Humanity has never proved to be what it appears, in my experience; but I am forced to admit it, I am too old to fight my own battles."

"I should only be too glad to be of any assistance, I assure you," replied Robert, earnestly.

The hermit again sat down and began laughing heartily, yet in no boisterous fashion. His whole body shook with half-suppressed merriment; and this continued so long that Robert was fearing that he had really met with a lunatic instead of a level-headed man.

"Young man, do you not know, a single word will often conjure up a host of memories? A single sound, even a mere trace of some peculiar odor, may cause the present world to roll away and leave you facing the happy or the horrid past. Excuse my laughing, but those very words of yours I have heard so often in my younger days, yet seldom when they did not fall from lying lips."

"I meant all that I said or should not have said it. That is my usual way," said Robert, a good deal puzzled as to what to say or do.

"Yes, your usual way; but have we not all unusual methods, too, that we are quick to see may fit occasions? Whether or not I am deceived matters but little now," said the hermit, rather sadly.

"I did not ask you to announce your identity or invite your confidence, sir," replied Robert, with a good deal of spirit. "If Marmaduke Bloomfield never married I am very sorry, for he was mother's grandfather."

"She, then, is a daughter of my brother John. He married, so let that suffice. As to my father, I cannot tell the story of his days. I do not know it all. He and my mother lived not far away, from the day they entered their cottage until they died, she first, and he followed her soon. Who she was I never knew, but what she was I can speak with confidence. You are fortunate if your mother

is such a one to you as was mine to me, to all of us. Let that suffice. Be gentle to the long-departed dead. Say of your great-grandmother, her life was one great mystery, and let the world be content with that. Perhaps, through some strange chance, the veil may yet be drawn aside, and if so, I do not believe you would have just cause to blush."

What manner of man is this, anyhow? thought Robert, and why the mischief is he living here? There's more mystery about him than his father. Mother's a bit cranky at times, so it's the Bloomfield blood, that's certain.

As the hermit seemed disposed to be quiet for the time, Robert left him to his thoughts, but remembering that the day was rapidly passing, he remarked, "You are Arthur Bloomfield, then, my great-uncle?"

"I am, and recent events have loosened my tongue to such an extent that perhaps I have undone myself by telling you; but that woman knows it, and I

suspect your informant was the surveyor at Riverside, Henry Ridgeley."

"It was he who told me to come here," replied Robert.

"I felt it; but neither he nor Atlanta Guthrie are to be made my confidants. What I have to tell, and even a little plan to propose, I'll trust you with."

"Thank you, I am at your service," said Robert.

"Please do not make me laugh. This, then, is my story and my plan. I'll see once more if I am again to be deceived. I was young once, just seventy years ago. I say young once upon a time, as fairytales run, and how much the phrase means to an old man, and how little to you! and when I was young we had an old doctor living near, who fancied me. He said that I would be a man of mark. and so he helped me on in all my whims, and ruling my young head he ruined it. Well, let that go. Perhaps it was my fault as much as his. The doctor was a nature-lover in his way and had stored in his mind all that for years had happened

in his rounds of every highway in the township. Not a beast or bird but he could tell me wondrous things about them, and so too of the flowers on the roadside; every weed, and about all the trees in the woods and of strange growths in far-off swamps; he seemed to know them all. When we rode together he would point out some grassy hollow or high sandy knoll and tell me of the Indians that lived there, and often he would tie old Dobbin to the fence and we would rake the ashes of their fires and find odd shapes of stone, or pottery, or needles made of bone. To me this man was not of common mould. He did not talk like others, and all he said was not like matter printed in the books. Child as I was, to be another doctor, such as he, was my ambition, and I studied hard to find out for myself what he had learned, and hoped in some ways to surpass him, and, of course, surprise him. At times I did so, and then an hour would pass when he was puzzled at what I had found, and giving

up, would always say, 'Nature provides nothing for mere show,' and bid me solve the problem.

"Years quickly passed, and then, the matter of my future coming up, it was decided I should go to town and work in a great drug-house, and then, such time as was my own, read medicine. Perhaps, the doctor said, in a short time I might go to college. This hope thrown out, I left, without regret, my country home.

"Oh, what a precious fool I proved to be!

"I went willing-handed and not quite empty-headed. I labored faithfully day after day, and not a chance was missed to gather knowledge. To be learned was my sole ambition, and my fellow-clerks laughed at me. I was made the butt of all their petty jokes. But it seemed my manner had attracted the employer, and in time I was a little favored, and at last there came an invitation to his house. I went with much doubting clogging my footsteps, but,

having passed the threshold, I was made to feel at ease. The merchant questioned me of early days and spoke of the old doctor. I fancy I grew eloquent at times, he gave such close attention; and I saw, too, that his daughter was attracted by my words, and this gave me more courage to speak. It was so strange to me to see her shudder if I spoke of snakes and how she smiled when talking of the birds. That evening was a marked one in my life, and, dating from it, I began a new career,—and, let me add, began to play the fool.

"What followed is not strange. I fell in love. A beardless youth in love with sweet sixteen,—well, not quite that; but how my books grew dull and my thoughts ran upon a single theme!

"Oh, what a precious fool I proved to be!

"I saved my little earnings till I had sufficient for a ring that I had seen and proudly bought it.

"Oh, what a precious fool I proved to be!

"One morning my employer called for me, and, closeted with him, the bitter truth came out that for these many months I had been wildly dreaming. He said, in perfect kindliness, 'Arthur, boy, you are so rich in hope that you believe the meanest rags are cloth of gold, and you give no heed to those things the world holds have lasting value. Let me call you back from your wild fancies. Shut out all thoughts of Edith, and, poor boy, remember that your parents are not married, and you must suffer!"

"'Base-born and poor!' I exclaimed, rising from my chair and facing him; and angrily I added, 'Then to be rich and well-born, however base, would suit you!' And I left the room abruptly, and that day left town, and for years was a wanderer, but never idle. Here and there I worked,—worked like a slave,—and fortune smiled on every effort, for I was not one of those workmen who hate seven A.M. and are always listening for the noon-bell. There was enough method

in my madness to grow rich, or rich enough for me: and that ring I kept. and then bought others and rare stones: and now, I cannot tell you why, I love to think that I still have them where, at briefest notice, I can bring them out. And then I wearied of the business world, and, wondering where to choose to end my days, I heard of the strange whim, these woods were sacred to their owner, and not one tree had fallen. and I returned, and, bargaining for this cabin while I lived, have spent long, pleasant years among these trees that charmed me when a child, long, long ago. Perhaps my mind has weakened, -who shall say?-but this has been my hobby. The merchant's daughter is still living, and, like myself, unmarried. have dreamed, -day-dreamed, I mean, -when precious quiet rested on these woods, that she would find me yet, in my old age, that I, with lover's tenderness, might greet my only love and offer her these many sparkling jewels. And often, in this merry month of May, when

not a warbler but here has his mate, I hear my feathered friends far in the woods, and drawing nearer, with their sweetest songs, until their whole array is marshalled in the trees that face the lawn, and then—then do I fancy they announce her coming, and I look wistfully adown the path.

"Perhaps, my nephew, now you think me mad; but it's a mild lunacy that has done no harm." And the hermit suddenly stopped speaking and looked sadly at the ground.

After Robert had recovered from his intense surprise he ventured to remark, "What you have told me is not like any matter of real life, but a wild romance, and I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing, if that's possible; and now for my plan. Come here again at noon day after to-morrow, and I will be ready to unfold it and put upon your young shoulders a heavy task," said the hermit, thoughtfully, in reply.

"What's that?" asked Robert, much surprised.

"To meet, in covered warfare, that woman," replied the hermit.

"Who?"

"Atlanta Guthrie. She wants these jewels, and I trust you will prevent her getting them."

"How can she get them?" asked Robert, much surprised.

"'How?'" repeated the hermit; "by a dozen ways. Robbery, seeking to send me to a hospital as insane; murder, even. She has wit enough, it seems, to have learned I have them, and I am old. Has she wit enough to outwit you?" And the hermit gave Robert a very searching glance.

"I do not think so," Robert replied.

"Do not be over-confident, and—good-by."

CHAPTER X

HENRY RIDGELEY RECEIVES A LETTER

↑ LL that Alice could think of concerning the visit of Robert Atwood to the Ridgeleys had been related to her brother, and this had brought again to mind, very vividly, the subject of the hermit's identity, and Henry was moved again to go over all the evidence; and he was more and more convinced that the present hermit and his greatuncle, who had disappeared years ago, were one and the same person. as he told his sister at the time, as the old man was evidently comfortable and preferred to live unknown to his people. why should he not do so? He was no millionaire, that made him just to that extent of peculiar interest. Doubtless the little property he had would be spent with his life, or, if aught

remained over, would be left to those with whom he had occasional business contact, and it was unquestionable that he had the right and the mind to intelligibly will his property, if he had any. Still, Henry claimed, outside of all such considerations, he was an interesting man. and what he had said to the ship-canal surveyor made him, to Henry, even more The surveyor had repeated the SO. hermit's words to Henry, and since then the latter was the more curious about the old man and desirous of paying him a visit and talking to his supposed greatuncle, but he had no good reason for so doing, and knew from hearsay, which did not lie, how those moved by mere idle curiosity had been met.

Henry Ridgeley's thoughts were all upon this one topic as he drove into Riverside from his home to his office, and it was perhaps because of such a train of thought that the letter from Atlanta Guthrie, that he found upon his table, was the less startling; for do not coming events forever cast their shadows

before? Are not premonitions simply evidence of a law in nature that we have not yet explained?

The letter ran as follows:

DEAR MR. RIDGELEY,—Though vou're a cousin, we have never met, but you certainly have a general idea as to my identity; but it is not to merely claim relationship that I write. As you're well aware, you have living near you the so-called "Hermit of Nottingham." is, in fact, your and my great-uncle, Arthur Bloomfield. Possibly you have not interested yourself in the matter of relationships and cannot trace the intricacies of kin beyond your immediate family; it is so with many that I meet, but your interest may be aroused by the fact that you and your sister and myself and the two Atwoods are his heirs, next in line after our parents, but the latter are indifferent and the Atwoods very wealthy. I am probably right in saying that my mother and myself are the only ones that stand in need, and hoping the fact will not rouse an ambition for wealth easily acquired but a worthy desire to help your needy cousin, let me add in conclusion that our greatuncle has in his possession jewels of much value and probably other property. How can the old man be induced to remember his poor relations, or, if his mind is affected, be pre-

vented from giving them to others, and even leaving no trace of their whereabouts, if they are hidden?

How can you assist me, do you suppose, or how can we help ourselves by preventing a catastrophe? I desire to see you and talk the matter over, but concluded to write before coming, and so pave the way for a cousinly acquaintance.

Very truly yours,
ATLANTA GUTHRIE.

Henry Ridgeley was a mild-mannered man who had his business to look after and attended strictly to it. There were no exciting incidents in what he had to do, but now he was brought face to face with decided novelty that suggested a good deal of shadiness, mystery, and complications of concealed purposes. He looked from his desk out of the window, and the world seemed different.

"Well, I'll be switched!" he exclaimed, as he put down the letter he had just read. "It's just what I thought, except the jewels. I know he must have money, and I saw his likeness to

my grandfather more than once when I was there, some time ago."

"Did you speak to me, sir?" asked his clerk, who was well aware that Mr. Ridgeley did nothing of the kind.

"No, no; excuse me!" replied Mr. Ridgeley, confusedly. "The fact is, I've got a curious letter here that has set me to thinking out loud."

"What I thought," remarked the clerk, "and I spoke to prevent your saying aloud more than you wished."

"Thank you," Mr. Ridgeley replied, and, folding the letter, was about to place it in its envelope when the office door opened, and his sister Alice came in with a lively motion that brought sunshine, summer breezes, and all the best things of life with her.

"Say, Al----"

"Say, Harry——" they exclaimed at the same moment, for both had announcements to make.

"What is it?"

"What is it?" they asked in the same breath, and then the two stood facing

each other and, neither having gained any advantage in the wordy meeting, both laughed.

- "Me first!" exclaimed Alice, quickly, and then followed up her advantage with, "I'm going over to Clifton to see Carrie Rockwood——"
- "She of the Psyche knot, that is one day high church and the next a pagan?" asked Henry.
 - "Stop making fun of her-"
- "Or do you really mean to halt at the Rockwoods, and hope that Algernon Maurice will slowly saunter by, see you, and stop? How the boy loves to stop and hates to start! He never rows against the tide, I've noticed, when we're out on the river——"
- "Will you ever stop? But here's my business. Will you come after me in a row-boat, for I suppose the ferry won't run after sunset? Captain's afraid to go out after dark." And Alice looked at her brother in a way that showed she meant him to do exactly as she said.
 - "I suppose it's my orders, sis,"

Henry meekly replied, "and I'll have to obey. All right; but do read this letter and tell me what you think of it." And he handed his sister the epistle in question, and then sat down again to study her countenance as she read, for he had learned to give that more attention than her words. If word and look agreed, then it was as firmly settled as Persian and Medean law. In this case it was a bit confusing as a study, for Alice frowned, looked puzzled, surprised, indignant, pleased, and then back to the frowning and repeat. No April sky ever exhibited such complete transitions. When she came to the end, she crumpled the letter in her tightly closed fist, and remarked in a low tone so the clerk might not hear. "If I know anything about women. Atlanta Guthrie's to be watched. She's more devil than saint by a great deal."

"See here, Al, don't be so hard on a stranger. I don't see that she's said anything to warrant your sweeping condemnation." And Henry Ridgeley

showed he was a good deal disappointed at the stand his sister took.

"Oh, no; of course not. Just like a man. You take what every woman tells you at one hundred cents on the dollar, when she doesn't mean to pay you in gold but fifty-three-cent dollars. I read between the lines here and there." And Alice straightened herself and posed as a very goddess of wisdom before her brother, and then with an effort subdued her smile and offered in its stead a slightly contemptuous look, as if in her opinion her brother was not equal to such an occasion as the letter presented.

But he thought otherwise, and said, "Perhaps you have too good an opinion of your judgment, sis. I think there's a great deal of common sense in Miss Guthrie's letter, and she's right about his property. It ought not to be lost."

"But, you foolish boy, don't you see she wants to use you as her monkey to pull the hot chestnuts out of the fire, and you'll burn your fingers for her

benefit and thank her for the opportunity. Oh, you men! And suppose your old man is somebody else and not Uncle Arthur, what a nice mess you would make of it! Well, I must go, and be sure to come after me; not too early, it's moonlight; and mind what I tell you about that woman. I don't like her."

Henry Ridgelev was now more disturbed than when he read the letter. He hoped, the moment he saw her come in the office, that Alice would be delighted and enter into Atlanta Guthrie's scheme with eagerness, and, all proving counter to his wishes, he was in somewhat of a quandary, but concluded, after much reflection, to invite his cousin to call upon him at his office for consultation on the subject. Whether he went a step further and suggested in a roundabout way, or even directly, that she should call on his mother and sister. could be determined later. Certainly he must acknowledge the receipt of the letter, and in so doing follow out her

suggestions. She wanted to come to Riverside to see him on a matter of business: why should she not do so? She must, and indeed proposed to, take the initiative, and all that he proposed to do was not in any sense linking him to her in any shady designs on the hermit. He wrote, and then himself posted the reply, and found, as was very natural, he had no mind for other business during the day.

CHAPTER XI

ROBERT ATWOOD MEETS ATLANTA GUTHRIE

H ISTORY is continually repeating itself, and Robert Atwood found, while at the breakfast table the morning after his visit to the hermit, that he was again to act the part of a reporter, and all the more difficult was his rôle because he had to speak his little piece, not write it. Then, too, there was a larger audience than before, the addition being a distant cousin,—now his mother's companion,—Atlanta Guthrie.

Before the meal, when he was about to go to the breakfast room on the floor below, there had come a timid little knock at his door, and Robert, opening it, found Helen standing there, with her big blue eyes, as he said at the time, as big as saucers, and also there was a

curious expression on her face that he could not decipher.

"What's the matter?" Robert asked, moved by a feeling that somehow something had gone wrong.

"May I come in?" Helen whispered.

"Yes; why? What the deuce is up?" asked Robert, a good deal worked up over his sister's mysterious manner.

"Say, Bob, what do you think," Helen said, solemnly, when she closed the door behind her, "Atlanta Guthrie's here for good and——"

"What?" exclaimed Robert, interrupting Helen and staring at her as if he saw a ghost.

"She's here for good and-"

"Evil," again her brother interrupted her by saying, and added, in an undertone, "The devil!"

"You're right there; I don't like her. There's something crooked behind every word she says, and when she smiles most and purrs like a pussy cat, she's doing her worst. What mother sees in the nasty, red-headed thing I don't

- know." And Helen showed by her trembling voice that she felt as strongly as her words indicated.
- "And she means to stay, you say?" asked Robert.
- "Yes; mother has coaxed her to stay as companion," replied Helen, with a quaver in her voice.
 - "When did she come?"
- "Yesterday, noon; straight here from Georgia."
- "'Straight here from Georgia,'" repeated Robert. "I like that, sis." And then he stopped short and stared out of the window.
- "What do you mean?' asked Helen, surprised at the sudden change in her brother's manner.
- "Oh, nothing. Let's go down to breakfast; I'm hungry, for a wonder."

At breakfast they met, Atlanta and Robert, and the latter was all affability and good spirits. All noticed he was talkative beyond his usual self. Indeed, he was so persistently loquacious

that his mother watched him closely for some time and wondered why, considering his high spirits, he made no mention of Alice Ridgeley. Finally her patience was exhausted, and she remarked, with a good deal of ineffectually concealed sneer in tone and manner, "Robert, you must have had a jolly time at the Ridgeleys, your spirits are so exalted."

"Why, mother, I have been nowhere near the Ridgeleys, except they live in the same county. I went to see an old man who lives in a deserted region, and such a quaint specimen of antiquated humanity! He was like a chapter in a book."

"Oh, do tell us!" exclaimed Helen.

"Indeed, it must have been interesting, particularly now that you are so taken up with country connections. May I ask who he was, and how you heard of him?" said Mrs. Atwood, slowly, and not looking up as she spoke.

While this conversation was going on, Atlanta looked intently at her plate and

scowled; put on her "devil-face," as Helen called it.

"Of course," Robert replied, cheerfully, to his mother, "you can know all about it. I had an interview with Joel Bostwick, and he told me a great deal about my great-grandfather, Marmaduke Bloomfield."

Atlanta brightened when she heard these words and the floodgates of her pretty speeches were opened wide.

"Oh, Cousin Robert, how intensely interesting! Dear mother has often told me so much of the Jersey Bloomfields and their pretty home and quaint old-fashioned ways, and how she would love to see these people and places." And then stopping to take breath, she opened wide her wonderful eyes, now deeply, darkly, beautifully blue, and the long lashes shaded them to perfection; and the gentle purring sound that Helen had mentioned, which seemed to accompany rather than to constitute her voice, was now more marked than it had been, when she added, in what to many would

have proved resistless pleading, "And, Cousin Robert, may I not some time go with you to see this queer old man, if your mother can spare me, and the Ridgeleys and where grandfather lived? Oh, how I would love to go, just once!"

Robert hesitated just a moment, but in a small fraction of a second many a hate has been bred. Both made resolutions at that same fraction of an instant; yet the time was so short that neither Mrs. Atwood nor Helen noticed anything amiss. Robert said, in a very deliberate way, so different from his previous manner that it was noticed, "Perhaps, some time, with myself as a guide, mother, Nell and you might make up a party to come down on the neighborhood like an avalanche, and perhaps the Ridgeleys might condescend to take us in."

Atlanta's eyes were green in an instant and only glittered as ice in winter sunshine.

"Condescend!" exclaimed Mrs. Atwood, indignantly. "Well! I must say I am surprised at the way you look at

such matters. As if the Ridgeleys were our superiors and——"

"Come, mother, don't take me up so seriously. In one way they are: they do not criticise us as we do them. They are contented and happy, I have no doubt, and never bother their heads about us; and in that way they do show to better advantage than those who consider mere wealth and living in a city as necessarily making one superior to another differently situated."

"I did not suppose, Robert, I was to be lectured by my son." And then seeing all were uncomfortable, she piloted the family out of the difficulty by turning to Atlanta and remarking that she must remember that only a few years are needed to bring about many changes. The old people are gone, the old ways discontinued, and very largely the landmarks are removed. Those that represented the family at the homestead and its neighborhood were to-day neither wealthy nor cultured——

Robert looked up with a flushed face

on hearing this libel on their culture, but a look from his mother silenced him.

So, she continued, such a visit as Robert suggests would probably be in most respects as gloomy as going to a country church-yard.

Robert twisted about in his chair until every joint of that unfortunate piece of furniture threatened to give way, but he said nothing.

Helen laughed, and suggested that, judging Robert from his distress, he evidently thought his mother's picture was too gloomy and not warranted by the facts as he had recently found them.

No one replied to her remark, and Atlanta, glancing from Mrs. Atwood to Robert and back again, said, "Possibly Cousin Robert is an instance of the reappearance of primitive tastes, and finds the plain folk of the Jersey wilderness quite congenial."

"And very much more probably," Robert now replied, with a deal of emphasis in every word, "you are all talk-

ing about what you know nothing of. If the city was a little more countrified it would not be to its disadvantage. When I am ready to go into details I shall proceed to do so." And Robert looked over the letters that had been placed near his plate.

"Which means when I am not present?" asked Atlanta, in tones as sweet as a grosbeak's monologue.

Instantly Robert looked up, attracted by the music more than the meaning of her words, and said, rather pleasantly, "I did not say so, certainly, nor intend to give that impression."

"Have you another letter from Alice Ridgeley?" asked Helen.

As his sister spoke Robert happened to look up again, and at Atlanta, though not intentionally. As he did so, he said "No" rather impatiently, and noticed Atlanta's eyes turn from celestial blue to infernal green, and felt that he was forewarned and so forearmed. Somehow she must be got rid of; but how carefully must he go about it! Here was a

task set before him such as he had never imagined and not at all to his liking.

"Before we leave the table, Cousin Robert, will you not favor us with some account of this Mr. Bostwick that you met in the country? It must have been an interesting interview to you, and so why not to us?" And Atlanta pleaded with her looks as well as her words.

"Really, the interview was not of much importance," Robert replied. "He remembered a good deal, I don't doubt, but he had a gabby way of telling it that made me feel as if there was a good deal of romance mixed with his facts. 'We met by chance,' as the song runs, for I was not looking for him, but for another old character they call up there 'the hermit.'"

"The hermit!" exclaimed Helen.
"How romantic! Did you see him?"

"I am going to see him in a day or two, if he will permit me," replied Robert, not looking from his letters as he spoke.

"And is he a survival of colonial times, or one of your relations, or what, that you should spend so much of your time in the backwoods of New Jersey?" asked Mrs. Atwood, with a satirical expression that was extremely irritating.

"Oh, he's an old man up there that perhaps can tell Nelly about her pedigree, if he knows the neighborhood, as I suppose he does. You see, mother, now I've started, I want to know all I can about the Bloomfields and then let the subject drop. It may be useful knowledge some day."

"And what of the Ridgeleys? Are they another subject of your laborious investigations?" asked Mrs. Atwood, still maintaining a satirical manner that Robert affected not to notice, and so the more irritated his mother and set Atlanta to thinking.

"I would rather not discuss those people at present," he replied.

"I presume not," Mrs. Atwood said, icily, and rose from her chair.

Helen and Atlanta also arose and

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moved towards the door, but the latter did not leave the room, as Robert supposed. A moment later, looking up from a letter he was reading, he saw her standing near him, and looking very attractive, too. He put down his letter and met her steady gaze with one equally firm and wreathed in a pleasant smile. For the first time they were alone, and she realized how handsome he was. Could she conquer him, she wondered.

Robert misinterpreted her looks, and, thinking she was troubled—as well she might be—and about to make a confession, said, as pleasantly as he could, "Have you something to say to me, Miss Guthrie?"

"'Miss Guthrie!" Atlanta repeated, with a voice filled with vexation. "I am right in my inference, Mr. Atwood. You do not like me."

"I did not know," replied Robert, quietly, "that I was given to jumping at conclusions or forming opinions off-hand of people that I meet." And he looked

down at his letters and at every point except towards her.

"I can give you the family history that Nelly wants. I have it all from my grandmother, through mother, and can save you these tiresome trips to Riverside and vicinity. You must have missed the comforts of your club terribly these past few days."

"Thank you, Miss Guthrie. You are very kind, but I have become quite fond of adventure of late, and take as naturally, now, to going to Jersey as a duck to water."

"Evidently. Your similes smack of the farm-yard; and you are 'fond of adventure,'" repeated Atlanta, in an irritating way. "Your mother would say 'Adventure' was a nickname for Alice, and I can tell you something of the Ridgeleys."

"I sincerely wish mother would keep her opinions to herself," exclaimed Robert, a good deal out of patience, and was about to say something more on the subject, when, to his intense sur-

prise, he found that Atlanta had disappeared. She had glided from the dining-room while he was speaking and he did not know it. "That woman is in league with the devil," he muttered to himself.

An hour later, having finished smoking a contemplative pipe in the library, and glanced over the morning's paper, Robert Atwood, in an unusual frame of mind, put on his hat and started to go out. He saw no one as he passed to the front door, yet, while his hand was upon the knob, he felt moved to tarry a moment and look back. He found Atlanta standing immediately behind him, and she, with a winsome smile, said, "Are you on your way to Jersey?"

"No, not to-day;" and then added, "I thought you might want me to do some errand for you from your coming to the door."

"Nothing, thank you, Cousin Robert," replied Atlanta, with just a trifle of emphasis on the "cousin."

Robert noticed it and was quick to see its import. "Good-morning, Miss Guthrie," he replied, very ceremoniously, and, when out in the street, said to himself, "Damn that woman! I must keep Nelly away from her. What was mother thinking about?"

In her own room, with the door locked, Helen Atwood was sitting at her pretty desk, filling out here and there a blank in her papers, and not a sound but she interpreted at the instant as a tap at the door by Atlanta, and she was saying, ever and anon, "Confound that woman! I must keep Bob away from her. What was mother thinking about?"

In her room, Mrs. Atwood was tapping her eye-glasses against the unfolded morning paper, and, faintly hearing the front door close, she muttered, "Dear me! I was so in hopes Atlanta would be able to draw Robert away from this miserable Ridgeley business, but it's too late, too late."

In her room, Atlanta was pacing, catlike, to and fro, and hissed between her closed teeth, "If that fool sees the hermit I must go back to Georgia, I suppose. Thank fortune, his mother's a fool, and that fact may help me a little, if the worst comes to the worst. Perhaps I can fight, if I am a woman."

CHAPTER XII

ALICE RIDGELEY SEES THE HERMIT

LICE RIDGELEY, leaving home for a ride, and saying nothing as to where she was going, dexterously drove her pony to the hermit's door. she avoided upsets, and why Toby, intelligent as he was, did not balk or back, when taking the wood-path, is altogether "Perhaps the a matter of speculation. old oaks looked with amazement at my coming and drew back," she playfully suggested, "though I didn't see them move; but Toby knows his business thoroughly and seemed to take it as a joke, so, somehow, we wriggled through going and coming."

Alice left the pony to his own concerns and loosened the reins so he could nibble the unmown grass if so disposed; then, with all the confidence of one call-

ing upon a dear friend, knocked gently on the door of the hermit's cabin.

In a moment it was opened, but only for a little way, and the hermit, looking out, said, in an assuring, kindly voice, "What is your errand?"

"To ask about orchids, arbutus, and other wild-flowers. My brother, Henry Ridgeley, said you could tell me what I wish to know; that is, if you would, and I knowyou will," replied Alice, with great animation and show of confidence.

"How do you know it?" the hermit asked.

"Because you can have no reason for withholding what I want to know. I've no wish to exterminate any species by pulling them up root and branch."

While she was speaking the door opened very slowly, and by the time she uttered her last word the hermit was wholly revealed to her, and then she added, looking at him with a good deal of astonishment, "And you do look like grandpa did, just as Henry said."

"And what, pray, has my appearance

to do with orchids, arbutus, and wildflowers generally?" asked the hermit, with a forbidding frown, fearing evidently he had been attacked by a chatterbox.

- "Nothing really," replied Alice, undismayed by the hermit's manner; "but you know we young people often think aloud——"
- "Too often," interrupted the hermit; "too often. It is one of the curses laid upon your sex."
- "And don't men ever say too much, I'd like to know?" asked Alice, with some show of indignation.
- "And what has all this to do with orchids and wild-flowers?" again asked the hermit.
- "Oh, bother the orchids! You put it all out of my head," Alice replied, with some impatience.
- "And may I not say, 'Oh, bother' the visitor?" asked the hermit, with a twinkle of the eyes that gave Alice abundant confidence.
- "Yes, except to me; I'm an exception——"

"Why?" asked the hermit, himself surprised.

"Because the average girl doesn't come here to ask about orchids; indeed, doesn't come here at all."

"You are right as to the latter statement," remarked the hermit, as if talking to himself, "'the average girl doesn't come here at all.'"

"Well, however you decide to class me, Mr.—Mr. Hermit,—I don't know your right name,—I want to know if I can find the yellow cypripedium about here?"

"I think not, but the purple one is common."

"Where?" asked Alice; "near here?"

"Back where the ground is swampy, and where there is no path you could follow, but tangled underbrush, and snakes and lizards, frogs and toads."

"Oh, jolly!" exclaimed Alice, clapping her hands. "I thought the wild-life once about here was now all a matter of yesterday, and now there wasn't anything bigger than a bumble-

bee. Snakes and lizards! How I love them!"

"Madam," said the hermit, looking at the young woman before him in blank astonishment, "did you say you were Henry Ridgeley's sister?"

" I did."

"Does he know you came here, or does any one know it?" asked the hermit, still looking very much puzzled, for now he had met face to face an unfamiliar phase of humanity.

"No one knows that I am aware of. I come and go pretty much as I please. I'm a woman, not a child," replied Alice, surprised and a bit nettled by the old man's questions and manner.

"If your people do not know it, they ought to," he said, very firmly.

"Why so?"

"Because young women like you that profess to love snakes cannot have arrived at years of discretion, or discretion has been put forever beyond their reach. I beg you to return home. Indeed, I am particularly averse to interruptions

this morning; and there have been so many of late,—too many, too many. Isn't it true, Pudge, that our pleasant days seem to be over?" And the hermit looked from Alice to the dog, which replied to his master with a low bark and a double rap with his tail on the cabin floor.

"But really, I mean all that I say," persisted Alice, who determined to stand her ground and retire a victor rather than vanquished. "I know the snakes about here are not dangerous, for the rattlesnakes and copperheads are all gone, if they were ever here; and what possible harm can a little gray lizard do? I've tried to be sensible in my view of such matters, and now you throw cold water on the whole thing, besides being positively rude to me." Alice paused a moment, to see if her remarks would be met by any comment, and then added. in a more cheerful tone, "But I thank you for the information given me. explore the back swamp-land in due time."

"For what purpose?" asked the hermit, with a look that showed he anticipated no such avowal from Miss Ridgeley.

"Why, to get some orchids, of course. I have determined upon having a little private wilderness of my own, a 'weedery' as I call it, where I can have all the wild-flowers that will bear transplanting at my elbow, so to speak, and it occurred to me you could give me all sorts of help in the matter if you would; and I meant to find out for myself as to the latter point. If I had said at home where I was going, everybody would have shouted and insisted it was of no use, but sometimes everybody is mistaken."

"And was this your real errand?" asked the hermit, and showing by the manner of his putting the question he was still incredulous.

"'My real errand'? Well, I'm not given to downright lying, that I am aware of," replied Alice.

"Intentionally or not, all people are liars upon occasion, and very many con-

sider skilful lying the climax of the fine arts."

"Goodness, Mr. Hermit! you remind me of some of the old characters that I hear and read about occasionally,—the philosophers."

"I lay no claim to any such character or similarity to one, but I have always called a spade a spade, and hence my unfitness for the world at large; but I will not trouble you with references to myself."

"I wish you would," replied Alice, earnestly.

"A good deal more, perhaps, than tell you of the orchids. It's true, Pudge, it's true. We're doomed to endless interruptions."

"Not from me," replied Alice, haughtily. "Let us stick to wild-flowers. Do you know of any that are rare, growing near, that would bear skilful transplanting? I'm in earnest now." And she looked so directly at the hermit that he was convinced of her sincerity.

"There are many flowers in their sea-

sons," he said, "but I cannot tell as to their rarity. I do not even know their names. They are like the birds, friends of mine, and for my own convenience I have to coin names for them. I call every flower 'Beauty' and every bird by a nickname that seems, to my mind, to suit it."

"And you like birds?" remarked Alice.

"Extremely," replied the hermit.

"Then we're on common ground, and I'd like to stay all day and talk about them.— No, no, no! I didn't mean that, but stay and hear you talk about them."

"You are very considerate, surely, but I have not given a day to anybody but myself for many years, and this is a long interview to accord any one."

"And a plain hint for me to depart," said Alice, laughing at the earnestness of the hermit; "but you'll have to grant me willy-nilly the woman's privilege of the last word. You've made a mistake in living here alone all these years; at least,

that is my opinion. At this time of year, too, it must occur to you, when every bird is mated and companionship is as universal as two or twenty birds on the same bush. What a sorry spectacle would a bush be with only one blossom or a bachelor bird or an old-maid jennie wren! No, no; you've made a mistake,—a big mistake."

- "Madam, are you married?" asked the hermit, impatiently.
 - " No, but---"
- "Hope to be," interrupted the hermit, with both an audible and a visible sneer.
- "I did not say so. I live at home, though, not alone," replied Alice, apologetically, and for a wonder with a feeling that her footing was gone.
- "And is it your choice?" asked the hermit, with a look expressive of doubt upon the subject.
- "Certainly," promptly replied Alice. "Why?"
- "And it is mine to be here and, madam, alone." And the old man very strongly emphasized his last word.

Alice hesitated, not knowing what to say, and recognizing she had said far too much, was struggling for a fitting last word that would set matters aright, but her wit failed her for once. As she lingered, she noticed that the door was slowly closing and the hermit being shut from view. The pause was an awkward one, and when to say merely "goodmorning" was upon her lips, the cabin door again opened slowly and the hermit appeared. His countenance showed no trace of displeasure. Stepping out upon the grass, he said, "I will help you to your carriage, and when you are seated, with the understanding that when I cease speaking you will drive away, I will tell you something; though why this sudden impulse on my part I do not understand. Your surprise at what you have seen and heard is genuine; your errand was what you stated it to be; this I believe, but to trust in another's words is dangerous. believe there's a flower called 'Love-liesbleeding; there ought to be one called Truth-lies-dead, for truth is no conspicu-

177

ous bloom that flowers wherever men and women chance to tread. You say I made a mistake in even coming here. Others have said the same thing, but gave no reasons. You feebly attempted to do so, and I was amused at your childish, impetuous way of setting forth ill-considered facts. You recalled myself to myself as you spoke and here's my return."

Alice walked to the pony cart and sprang in without assistance, and, taking up the lines, said, with a smile that would go a great ways with any but a hermit, and an octogenarian at that, "Now I am ready—not to go, but to listen. I am all attention and all secrecy, if you wish it."

"Secrecy!" exclaimed the hermit, with a sneer.

"Yes, secrecy," replied Alice, "for I can keep a secret so closely that the machinery of an inquisition could not force it from me."

"A woman keeps a secret! Those catchy words have played about a

woman's lips since the dawn of humanity on earth, like a butterfly hovering over a poisonous blossom. Your assertion is not unlikely the original lie, the mother of all subsequent deceptions. If an old man may offer a young person advice, let me urge you to rid yourself of such an idea. No woman ever yet kept a secret."

"I have nothing to say beyond promising to remember what you have said," replied Alice. "If your words are true, the sunshine is dimmed, flowers faded, bird's songs harsh and grating; but I do not believe you."

"I do not propose to discuss the matter. I came here to your carriage quite voluntarily, Miss Ridgeley, to briefly refer to, for your possible benefit, my shattered idols——"

"Shattered idols!" exclaimed Alice, with a shudder.

"Yes, my shattered idols; and you will contemplate yours in due time, unless early taken off."

"Taken off!"

"Taken away by that gentle comforter, Grim Death." And the hermit smiled as he noticed the expression of horror Alice had at such a thought.

"How generally all old men," the hermit said, "know that people spend the best years of their lives in building, and have but the ruins to contemplate when most they need the comforts of the completed structure, and are brought to muse over shattered idols!"

"Goodness!" exclaimed Alice, with a shudder. "To talk that way on a May morning like this!"

The hermit nodded his head approvingly and smiled at her words, and then said, very deliberately, "May is the month for setting up our idols, but what of December's frosty touch? I say 'shattered' idols because of a sad experience. There is not a wild-bird in these noble woods but swears eternal constancy, and not a listening mate but, this bright May day, fully believes that all the happiness that crowds these fresh spring mornings will last until the dawn

of eternity. A more brilliant suitor comes; a more lovely mate is seen; the cooing of doves is drowned in the cry of heartless hawks; and behold, my good friend, the earth strewn with shattered idols But life has other serious themes than love. I was a young man once, and, when the dream of young love had proved a dream, I marched with confidence into the wide world and sought by occupation to drown my initial sorrow. Was what I found what it appeared to be?—what, therefore, I expected? By no means. The world is so complex that man's wit has to be as intricate as what it finds. To be plainspoken is to call yourself a fool. honesty that we find may be honest; the truth that we encounter may be truthful: but, if there are two open questions in the world, here they are. I plunged into the wild vortex, scrambling for wealth, and, by crowding many as worthy a man from his place, I gathered more than my share; but of what manner of good is it if, in these resting days that

finally come, we have still to labor and spend it all in vain attempts to rebuild our shattered idols? Will all the wealth you can imagine buy the realization of your cherished dream? Gold can never harden the walls of a bubble; and this my dream was as unsubstantial as the rosy bubble before me, which, while it lasted, I never thought of but as of adamant. Doubtless you have your idols now in the days of your youth. Learn not to love them at the cost of your peace of mind. Your most cherished idols may be shattered by a thought."

"But we do not all have such sad experiences," Alice replied, scarcely knowing what to say. "I know many old people that do not complain or run down this beautiful world as you do. Did you come here from necessity or choice?"

"From choice, you can rest assured of that; and the choice that led me here, to be alone and with my dog and birds, now prompts me to request you to leave me to myself."

"But I don't want to go," said Alice, pettishly.

"That was our bargain. I will see that you get the orchids that you wish. Good-morning." And saying this, the hermit turned away, and, re-entering his cabin, closed the door.

Alice sighed when she found her hour was up and the moment of departure had arrived, and, on her homeward way, she continually repeated to herself much that the hermit had said. And how, she wondered, was she to get the promised orchids? As to keeping a secret,—pshaw! of course she could.

CHAPTER XIII

ATLANTA GUTHRIE CALLS ON HENRY RIDGELEY

SO far as the world knew, Henry Ridgeley had never been in love, and the little fraction of the world that knew him had often wondered why. "Him and his Jill has got scattered, somehow, but they'll come together one of these days," was the prophetic conclusion of Euphemia Onquè, the old nurse; but Henry, when he heard it, remarked, "You're wrong for once, Phemie, or I'm mistaken."

Henry's bachelor notions were something strange in the minds of those who knew him best, for his disposition was that of one fond of society. He was the life of all the gatherings at the neighbors, and usually the first to propose a picnic in early summer or the initial dance in autumn. He was the

friend of all and counsellor of many, but he had no preferences, and was, at this time, set down as a confirmed bachelor, much to the regret of those who saw him most frequently; and no wonder, for a bachelor is an unfinished affair, say what you will. Nature has provided no place for them, and the places they make for themselves only render their peculiarities the more con-Even sacerdotal celibates are spicuous. blots on the fair face of creation. What Henry Ridgeley himself thought of the matter no one seemed to know. always laughed and turned the conversation into other channels when the subject was broached.

This pleasant May day he was sitting at his desk, with work enough before him to keep him busy all the time, and yet his mind wandered from it a good deal, for he had a strong suspicion that his sister might drive to the hermit's before going to Clifton, and he wondered what would be her reception. How much better, he thought, to have kept

his own counsel and followed up his investigations quietly! If nothing came of it no one would be the wiser: but now, if the hermit should prove a pauper to be buried by the county, he would be laughed at. Of course, Atlanta Guthrie's letter made all this seem improbable; but, then, might not Atlanta be mistaken? Henry found relief in whistling, but in such an awkward way the nerves of his clerk were irritated, and this lad—a misshapen machine made of blood and bones—rustled his papers so violently that Henry remembered his presence and ceased struggling to blow a tune through his unruly lips. This clerk could not be seen-so small was he, and so tall the desk-by any one entering the office, but he could both see and hear; first, because of sharp ears, and secondly, because of an eyehole in the desk that enabled him to keep watch when Mr. Ridgeley happened to be out. The clerk was a hunchback, but, to compensate for his crooked spine, Nature had sharpened

every other faculty; and he came of quick-witted stock, his mother keeping a toll-gate just out of town.

The identity of the hermit, while of no real importance, was so prominent in Henry Ridgeley's mind that to-day, busy as he ought to have been, it threatened to interfere with the progress of business, and he wondered how he might rid himself of it, and did the worst possible thing he could do,—read over again the letter he had received.

Do coming events cast their shadows before? Or, to put it in more prosaic shape, what are presentiments? Have we foreknowledge vouchsafed us? No one appears to speak very positively on the subject, and yet how universal is the experience! Daily on our lips are the words, "I felt sure that this would happen" or "that you would come." Premonition has given rise to folk-lore sayings, and yet we have no satisfactory solution of the mystery. That people far apart can influence each other's minds is incomprehensible, yet it ap-

pears to be true. Many a letter has announced itself. A great mystery that is akin to the dogma of the mind's immortality and leads us to think one life is not all with which we are to be burdened.

Henry Ridgeley felt unsettled. He was convinced that something was going to happen. Could it be possible, he said to himself, the hermit himself is coming into town and to see him? At that moment the office door was slowly opened and a lady entered the room. Henry looked up from his desk as she drew near, and then arose and offered the visitor a chair. It is some one calling concerning insurance, he hoped, and the subject of the hermit replaced by a matter of business.

"Is this Mr. Ridgeley?" the lady asked, and while he bowed and said "Yes," the visitor removed the little veil that lightly concealed her eyes and forehead. Immediately, Henry wondered if this could be—and at the same moment read the card the lady presented:

Miss Guthria

There is no length, from that moment, to which Henry Ridgeley would not have gone in belief as to the mystical and uncanny. His sluggish blood leaped forward with a bound, scales dropped from his eyes, and the world was moving at a quicker pace. He pushed all his business papers impatiently aside. He did not know it, but he was not a free man, but Atlanta Guthrie's slave. He did not dare return her gaze, yet it was with an effort that he kept his eyes from her. The while she measured her victim, and the quiet clerk in the rear measured her.

All this was the overfull moment that colors many an after-hour. There was no awkward silence, and with proper

promptness conversation began. "Miss Guthrie," remarked Henry Ridgeley, in an animated voice, not quite natural to him, perhaps,—"Miss Guthrie, I am delighted to see you. We are cousins of remote degree I believe, and your letter was a most interesting one to me; the more so because I had had for some time suspicions in that direction, and your letter came when I was dwelling a good deal upon them. I am at your service."

"Thank you, good cousin," sounded softly through the office with all the bewitching sweetness of an Eolian harp's whispered note. Henry had never heard such a voice before, and the clerk coiled noiselessly into a smaller space than before, intent, not upon his work, but her further words.

"And now," Atlanta continued, "that you have so thoroughly welcomed me and made me feel at home and not among strangers, let us put our shoulders to the wheel, so to speak, and see if we cannot move the mountain."

"That ain't a policy of insurance for me to write out, but it's my policy to listen," thought the clerk, and he smiled at his feeble effort to be funny; and Henry quite failed to notice that his visitor's expressions were rather mixed and ill-expressed, besides being cold and business-like; quite failed in all this, because her manner and her great blue eyes wove a spell about him that he could not resist.

What Henry did not notice, but his clerk did, was that a subtle odor filled the room, and giving way to her words while it was breathed, certain senses were dulled and others quickened. He, of course, did not realize, what amazed the listening clerk, that his voice lowered almost to a whisper and he purred his replies as she half whispered and purred in his willing ears. He did not see—the clerk did—that she drew nearer and nearer to him, and so he did not move back his own chair or change his position. The clerk, now almost uncontrollably overcome with wonder, thought of what

he had read, and rightly never believed, that birds and squirrels are sometimes charmed by serpents. Was it, after all. only a fable? Might it not be true, after what was occurring before him? Very still, as if but a stiffened corpse, finally sat Henry Ridgeley, as Atlanta unfolded the story of her life and how now, at last, the day had come for her to assert herself and stand where nature proposed she should stand, only the required wealth had not been forthcoming. was the task set before her now.-to find the wealth that should be hers. She had succeeded in locating it. Its present possessor was a feeble, but obstinate, old man, and of equal importance was her discovery of to-day: she had found the needful, trusty friend who was to aid her to secure the hoarded wealth of a helpless, half-dead man.

The clerk had a vision of a generous fee for dropping a word in an old man's ear.

For the last few minutes, for Atlanta spoke very rapidly, Henry listened with-

out interrupting her by so much as a word. He was, in fact, under the spell she had wrought so completely that he did not know until she had done speaking that her hand rested on his, and when he looked down at hers it glided away so swiftly, perhaps, he concluded, he was mistaken, after all. Of but one thing he was positive. He would willingly follow her to the ends of the earth. Never before had he known how sweet a thing it was to live, and revelling in her smiles, he prayed to her with his eyes to continue forever the sweet delirium.

Atlanta Guthrie was not the fool she had made of Henry Ridgeley. When she had nothing further to say she resumed the character of an ordinary woman, but left the poison to still work in his veins. She waited, without a trace of impatience, while he slowly gathered himself together mentally and became in some measure a free agent. He was free in a sense, but all his earlier views of the hermit were changed. That

13

old man was wholly different from what he supposed. When one looks through red spectacles, the world is on fire; look through green glass, in winter, and you have summer suddenly returned. hermit's wealth was really not his, but hers. There was being foul injustice done, and yet no legal means of redress. Would he help her? Yes, and Henry Ridgeley felt that the world was a blank except when following in her footsteps. Why should his sister have spoken so strongly of her? Was she not beautiful? Was she not fascinating? Was she not all that any woman should be. and not all one could fancy of womankind? Certainly none that he had ever met had proved to be of such a standard.

The view of the matter taken by the clerk, who had curled up like a snail, so fearful was he of discovery by her, was, that if there was but one such a woman in the world every thousand years, the idea of a personal devil would be widespread and take a very strong hold upon average humanity. The hunchback felt

that he had seen to-day the devil as near literally as ever happened to mankind.

After the lapse of a few fateful moments, during which Henry Ridgeley forswore his manhood, Atlanta again purred, and suggested many plans that might bring the hermit to terms. all-persuasive purring numbed his senses, yet not to the point of realizing what she said: but he did not notice-she took good care of that-that in all he was the actor in the foreground and she the spectator in the curtained box. She ventured skilfully to suggest at the last that money might be needed, and would be forthcoming at the proper time; and he did not realize that he would be the banker to provide the funds.

Then, her purpose accomplished, Atlanta drew back her chair, gave a distinct sigh of relief, for the strain upon her had been great; but for Henry, the cords had been loosened only, not snapped or thrown aside. In all matters, save his view of the hermit and

Atlanta Guthrie, Henry was himself again. As to those individuals, his mind was made up unalterably. His added life-work was her defence against probable enemies and the securing to her of the hermit's wealth. Of course, he felt now the hermit was incompetent to make a will. Of course, had endless That the Atwoods. buried treasure. being wealthy, ought not to share it. He and his sister, Alice, were not so near akin and could not expect to be benefited. But had he not a recompense for this unfortunate fact? had this day received at first hands the appointment of champion of Atlanta Guthrie, and he would prove a trusty knight.

There were two people at the same moment reading Henry Ridgeley's thoughts.

The hidden clerk said, quite inaudibly, to himself, what an infernal fool a man can make of himself, at a woman's bidding!

Atlanta read his thoughts as she might

have read his letters, and this time, without speaking at all, warmed him again to intoxication by her charms; with a mere look assured him that his slightest wish would be gratified, all his desires anticipated; all, everything, only aid her in stealing from a decrepid old man the very prop of his remaining days.

Mechanically Henry Ridgeley followed Atlanta Guthrie to the door, and as lifelessly returned to his desk; scarcely realizing that she was gone until she had passed far down the street. Then the languid tinkling of Rodno's languid ferry-bell roused him to the fact that she was no longer in Riverside. How fortunate that no other callers had happened in that day!

Henry looked dreamily at his desk, but his head was like a hive of bees. There was no continuity of thought. Vague impressions of a hundred sorts rushed tumultuously upon him, and he was mentally unbalanced. He had given his word to be her abject slave in a plan to take advantage of an innocent

old man, and yet he felt no twinges of conscience. It seemed right to do as she suggested merely because she suggested it. The thing itself in other hands was wrong. The splendor of her eyes, the music of her voice, the magic thrill that flowed from her finger-tips, these turned the world upside down for him. The clerk was right: what an infernal fool!

CHAPTER XIV

ROBERT ATWOOD RETURNS

POR reasons of his own, which he did not feel called upon to specify, Robert Atwood announced at breakfast that he was going again to Jersey, and probably would be detained until the day was spent, and therefore not home to dinner.

"But, Bob," Nelly remarked, "I'm sure to get in without the Bloomfields, so what does it matter? What's the good troubling poor Miss Ridgeley any more?"

"I do not expect to see Miss Ridgeley, sis, and it is only for my own satisfaction. If you will curb your patience and keep your mouth closed, when I get back I'll tell you lots—perhaps."

"Why perhaps? You're awfully aggravating."

"Am I? Well, I volunteered to

amuse you, and now you get mad. If I cannot use my own discretion in the matter, I'll tell you nothing, that's very certain;" then looking towards the head of the table, said, "Now, mother, don't be imagining all sorts of absurdities because I'm on the Jersey side of the river."

"Oh, my opinion of such matters counts for little," replied his mother, in a peevish way, "and I depend on Atlanta to keep me in good spirits."

"I'm glad to know she is a balm to your troubled nerves; as glad as I am sorry you think I am indifferent to your comfort; but really, mother, you are making a mountain out of a mole-hill."

"May I be allowed to suggest," remarked Atlanta, "that men do not like their affairs too closely looked into? It robs them of the opportunity to afford us pleasant surprises. Perhaps your son, Cousin Lucy, has one in store for you wholly different from what you imagine."

"Thank you, Miss Guthrie," said Robert, in reply to this suggestion and

bowing to her. As the ladies rose from the table, he took up the morning paper and glanced at the column headings; then, throwing the paper down, he exclaimed, "By Jove! I was going in an earlier train than t'other time." And he left the table hurriedly, and soon after was in that most democratic public conveyance, a Market Street car.

Robert did not care particularly what other people thought as to his movements, but he found just a trifle of satisfaction nevertheless in his thinking that any acquaintance he might chance to meet would conclude that he was going to Atlantic City, although it was so very early in the season. To engage rooms for the season would be a natural conclusion, and he laughed heartily to himself at such an idea, for just why anybody, unless for a few days in winter, should go to Atlantic City he could not understand. Nature there had been so largely thrust into the background and nothing artistic offered as a substitute, the attractions were a problem hard to

solve; certainly, for him, an occasional day there had unfolded nothing worthy being sought, and he thought of the immense advantages offered by the quiet farms about Riverside, and of one treehidden cabin in particular. His trip to-day, however, was one of business more than pleasure, and that feeling led him to walk to the very end of the train as the cars approached the station, and so leave it near the end of the platform where there were few people; and turning his back to everybody he hurried through a street running parallel to the main thoroughfare, and with a haste that would not attract attention walked eastward towards the Pemberton woods and his new-found uncle's home hidden in this remnant of the primeval forest.

"What, I wonder, will be the upshot of all this business?" Robert asked himself, half aloud, when the village was well behind him; and he fancied many strange outcomes and quite enveloped the hermit in a cloud of rosy mystery, from which he would come forth in

due time and make all his neighbors stare in blank astonishment. "The whole affair is more like a dream than reality," again speaking in a half-audible way to himself, "and perhaps I may come out at the little end of the horn. Thank fortune, nobody knows what I've been about."

Turning, at last, from the public road where the path led to the hermit's cabin, Robert drew in great lungsful of the fresh, woodsy air that was so sweet to merely breathe it was a luxury. "By Jove, that's nice!" he exclaimed, and began walking far less briskly that the pleasure of lingering among the old trees might be prolonged. "The smell of the woods hasn't been caught by the perfumer yet, and, I guess, never will be," was Robert's last audible soliloguy, as he gently knocked at the cabin door and listened for the welcoming "Come in" that he supposed would follow his announcement of arrival.

Hearing no response he knocked again, and a little louder, and then the

thought came that possibly he was on a fool's errand. Could the hermit be hidden in the woods at this very moment, laughing at him? What a joke if he had been victimized by a lunatic, as some of the hermit's neighbors would have said! It was deuced strange. Robert began to feel a little worried, and then partly cheered up by thinking he would have some excuse for calling again on Miss Ridgeley; but all his troubles vanished in an instant, for the sound of footsteps was heard, and looking about, he saw the hermit and Pudge approaching him.

"Have you a watch?" asked the hermit, before Robert had a chance to say even "good-morning." And the old man smiled as he asked this unlooked-for question.

- . "I have," replied Robert.
 - "The time?" asked the hermit.
 - "Twenty minutes of twelve."
- "And I said meet me here at noon to-day. Had you come then, you see, you would have found me waiting for

you, not you waiting for me. always, better too early than too late. Whittier says 'It might have been' are the saddest of all sad words. I wonder he didn't think of 'too late.' Too late! As I look back and see the ruined hopes of sixty years,-see, with the clear vision of unimpassioned thought, there is not a year in all the dead past of my life upon the head-stones of which might not appropriately be written, 'Too late.' My father's wisdom was all too tardy, and I am marked with the same defect. Had I been given the knack of thinking beforehand instead of afterwards. I had not been here. But, come, come, this is folly. I am not complaining. Let's go inside; and, Pudge, tell me if anybody comes within earshot." The dog straightway trotted to a clump of gooseberry-bushes and an oval bed of luxuriant white-and-green ribbon-grass, that joined the shrubbery, and in them disappeared so effectually that no one passing by, however near, would suspect the dog's presence. The

hermit laughed as he saw Robert's surprise at the dog's action, and said, "You see, these days, I have to be extra cautious, there are so many tramps about; but I cannot very easily be caught napping. There is a long, narrow passage-way, concealed by the bushes, that leads under the cabin floor. and through it to the room. Pudge don't need to bark, but can crawl into the cabin unseen and tell me quietly if there's anybody outside acting suspiciously. I say this because he has done so before, and it's what he will do again if occasion arises. I fixed the passage so he could go in and out at night without my getting up to open the door. But such an arrangement has its disadvantages too, for sometimes when Pudge and I are out for a tramp, or he is sleeping on the hearth in winter, wild-life takes a notion to wander in-doors by the same way, and unannounced visits from a skunk, for instance, are not desirable. Pudge's protest or even mine might lead to disaster. Twice, in autumn, pretty,

mottled milk-snakes have come in and coiled themselves in sweet content in front of my andirons, as if they thought that was preferable to subterranean hibernation. Now and then, too, pretty white-footed wood-mice come in, and these delight me. Why the smell of the dog does not keep them away I cannot understand, for they seem to know I have told Pudge not to worry any living thing but inquisitive man. But how could they know it? How is it possible?"

"They don't know it. You must explain it in some other way," replied Robert, very positively, as if he were an accomplished naturalist.

"How like the average man you meet!" remarked the hermit. "You have a series—every one has—of stereotyped ideas that are set forth with confidence, as occasion demands, and expect your hearers to accept them as mathematical demonstrations. I do not propose to in this case. Having no other friends, I have tried to gain the

confidence of the wild-life about me.and you can rest assured that the average creature of these woods, higher in the scale than a frog or hop-toad, does a good deal of hard thinking during its These creatures stop to consider the possible results of a proposed plan of action. Now, travel the world over, vou'll find few to believe it, but I do. It's one thing to study life by seeing it at odd times, however frequently, and quite another thing to study it by living with it. Trying to live like a wild beast has not in this instance, the meaning ordinarily attached to the expression. It is, very often, living in a more decent manner than some people do,—I had almost said, most people do. When an animal is free to come and go. its life has not only method, but eminently respectable habits characterize it. You will not be convinced by my merely saying so, and you'll not take the trouble to ascertain for yourself the facts, not being interested, and so you'll live and die in ignorance; but of one thing you

may rest assured, I never saw even—no, I'll particularize nothing; I never saw any creature that wasn't as much a gentleman, in its way, as any man I ever met; and as to contemptuously calling mice, minks, and musk-rats beasts, and looking down upon them as if their presence was the height of impudence, to my mind it's little better than calling yourself a fool. Do you see that chickaree?" And the hermit suddenly changed his tone and manner and pointed to a nearby tree.

"I don't," replied Robert; "and wouldn't know it if I did. What is a chickadee?"

"A little bird; but I said chick-a-ree, the little red squirrel. There it goes!" And as the hermit spoke, Robert saw a flash of brown light twist about the treetrunk, but could not have said whether it was a dead leaf, a snake, or even a shadow. How the hermit recognized it he could not understand.

"What of it?" asked Robert, when the creature had disappeared.

"Nothing, now it is gone. I was going to point out how intelligent was its attitude while it sat there, watching us. How absurd to say it was not rationally considering us while we stood here talking! The chance for an object lesson is gone; but never mind, we've other business on hand and must go in."

Robert, on entering the cabin, found that its interior arrangement was slightly altered. There were hooks that would hold the sash securely to the windowframes and a stout chain bolt on the door as well as a lock. In the middle of the room was a small table, and on it a few sheets of foolscap, a small bottle of ink, and two unused quill pens. The hermit pointed to these and remarked, "These are for show, not use, to-day. I want you to take up the pen and appear to be writing, while I will assume the attitude of one dictating. You needn't make a pen-stroke, but when we are through, place the sheets, folded, in your pocket, as if they were so many valuable documents."

"But there's nobody looking at us, and the dog's on the watch," remarked Robert, with a look of surprise, when the hermit ceased speaking.

"You have not studied all the possibilities. A man with a field-glass could see right in here and be out of the range of Pudge's nose or ears or eyes, and I've placed you in just the proper position to be seen."

"Why?"

"Because I suspect, of late, that I am watched or am likely to be. You know that Atlanta Guthrie has been here." And the hermit looked both troubled and angry when he mentioned her name.

"Atlanta fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Robert, impatiently. "She's at mother's now, and nowhere near us."

"At your mother's?" said the hermit, much astonished.

"Yes; and there as a fixture, I'm afraid," replied Robert, looking at the hermit, whose look of surprise had not passed off.

"It is most fortunate; but remember

she is not house-bound," said the hermit. "And how do you know she is not this very day dogging your footsteps? You may have been shadowed from the time you left home. She is capable of doing anything. Are you a spiritualist? Do you believe in ghosts or in magic?" asked the hermit.

"No, of course not," Robert replied, impatiently, for somehow he was beginning to feel that perhaps the hermit was a good deal of a crank, and his talk about wealth all moonshine.

"Well, I don't know what to believe. What you call modern theology offers no satisfaction as to the mysteries we meet with, and psychology doesn't explain everything. One thing is certain: that woman is devilish, if not a devil. She does have a certain power not given to every mortal. I had to struggle against an influence I could not understand all the time she was here; and it seemed to hang about the room long after she left. Did you ever see a den of snakes?"

"Why, no," replied Robert, much surprised at such a question and in such a connection.

"I forgot that you are from the city and have seen nothing," said the hermit, smiling as he spoke; "seen almost nothing. There is an odor in a den of snakes that has a peculiar effect on my senses, for one. It was not a merely sickening smell, but one that chained every sense, and I feel now that if the snakes had willed that I should lie down among them, I would have done so."

Robert remembered at this moment having read that some snake smelled like fresh cucumbers, and he aired this bit of knowledge with some satisfaction. "It's an odor like cucumbers, I believe," he remarked, and was about to extend his description in some way, when the hermit replied, "Yes, the rattlesnakes smell so, I have heard; but I mean the common harmless ones about here, the smell of a whole tangled mass of several kinds that have taken refuge in some spot for the winter. Now, I do not wish

to be disrespectful to the snakes, but Atlanta Guthrie reminded me of them. Her cologne could not keep down the odor of her devilishness, and why not say this? We have heard of the odor of sanctity, but this of Atlanta I take to be just the opposite. She may not know it, but either the devil has her in his power, which is the popular way of looking at such things, or she is a case of reversion to our more animal-like ancestry, which is a much more rational view, and the one I take."

"Do you not contradict yourself?" asked Robert, laughing. "You spoke so highly of animal life a moment ago and claimed that every beast was a gentleman, and now you speak of the possible devilishness of our remote ancestors."

"I'm no hand to argue, but let my mind run riot, I suppose; but perhaps beasts and the missing link were more brutal in the days before man appeared. The animals may have reached upward in their mental attributes through asso-

ciation with man. Certainly the struggle for existence against man's persecution has sharpened their wits. I don't know. It's too deep a subject for the unlearned. What I do feel to be true is, that while we ourselves may be the result of Creative fiat, I believe all our devils are of our own making, and we are not the victims of a great personal devil. But I see you are impatient——"

"No, not at all, but interested," protested Robert.

"How strong a hold have our habits upon us!" remarked the hermit; "you are impatient. I can read your countenance, and not five minutes ago you concluded, or half concluded, I was a crank and the talk about jewels a matter of moonshine."

Robert got upon his feet somehow, but he was staggered and sure some one had struck him a severe blow. Was not the hermit, rather than Atlanta, in league with the devil?

The old man began laughing heartily, but quite without that boisterous ex-

plosion of harsh sound that marks the back-country boor all the world over, and is not unknown even in polite society; and how true it is, man can rightfully be estimated by his laugh!

"So you think," the hermit said, when his merriment admitted of his speaking, "that this is a case of the pot calling the kettle black, and Atlanta's the saint and I'm the sinner. Don't let us discuss the question. Time will show, and let's to business."

Robert sat down again, but he was altogether at sea as to what to think. Certainly here was a type of old man that is now practically extinct, or a precious old humbug with the garrulity of age and weakened mental power.

"I say to business," remarked the hermit again, with a trace of severity in his manner. "I cannot explain to you how it is, but I read every thought of yours, and just now, so to speak, you are turning over very unpleasant pages. Close the book; that is, think of what's before us, not of me."

"I am ready," Robert replied, so meekly that the hermit laughed.

"Then let me tell you this. as I would like to keep the jewels that by their sparkling have amused me many an hour, it is dangerous to do so. I would have been robbed long ago and likely murdered, were it not that the tramps about here are mostly cowards. and suppose me to be an object of charity. As yet I have not been molested, but now I am likely to be. Atlanta appeared to me in a dream before I knew of her existence; came so vividly and with all the features of a conventional fiend, such as a great artist might paint, and with drawn dagger demanded all my wealth. She told me many things and asked certain questions, which made a vivid impression. an intense relief to find it all a dream, but this was only for a moment. that it was to come true. Perhaps not in every particular, but essentially so, and the gloom of such a thought has dimmed the brightness of the world

even during these May days. This is one of the mysteries that perhaps, after I am gone, I may be permitted to solve or will have solved for me,-the mechanism of these premonitions, or visions. or whatever you see fit to call them, for we do have them. I am free from the world, as you know, and have been these many years, but not wholly out of touch with it. I have known of more than one event before the ordinary means of acquiring information, as a letter, reached me. I knew full well the night that my sister Ada died. not say she came to me; but it was at the very hour she died, as a letter informed me, she came vividly to mind and I fancied I saw her, and said to Pudge at the time, 'She is gone.' looked for the letter, which came days after, for in a roundabout way that I have provided, such information drifts to the cabin at last. But no more of It is all Greek to your young experience and sounds like the mere empty babbling of a fool. The jewels!

Your intelligence, your interest, your hopes, come to the fore when I mention them, and, young man, they are real. I have them safely hidden and had a plan concerning them, but a recent event has changed this, and now I've my part to play in a little comedy——"

What is he driving at? wondered Robert, and the change in his countenance was as much an interruption to the hermit as spoken words would have been.

"Do not be so impatient, so incredulous, so lacking in a little faith," continued the hermit, after a brief pause. "My plans were changed very suddenly by the unexpected appearance of a bright young woman who quite won my heart, or, more properly, approbation."

"Thunderation!" exclaimed Robert, under his breath.

"I do not wonder at your surprise; but do let's to business. She came, she saw, she conquered; but she doesn't know anything about the latter fact.

This bright young woman came intent upon orchids."

"Orchids!" exclaimed Robert.

"Yes, our native orchids, and wished me to direct her to where they grew, for she was anxious to go to the spots and do her own digging. She lives not far away, and proposes to establish a little botanic garden of her own, a 'weedery' as she called it. She has a brother whom I do not like, a weak man really, as it seems to me, so I was suspicious of her errand at the outset, but she proved herself truthful and knows nothing of me really but as the hermit, or she kept all such matters quite in the background. She came, I say, and conquered. She is less near a relation-"

"A relation?" remarked Robert, not intending to interrupt.

"Yes, a relation; distant, but still to be traced, and a Bloomfield without the besmudged record of Marmaduke's descendants."

Robert did not feel particularly flat-

tered, but made no remark. He was determined to hear the hermit's whole story and not again interrupt him, even by any exclamation of surprise.

"This young woman," continued the hermit, "gave me the impression of entire honesty. Her eyes seemed widely open to all that is beautiful in this world. and, I thought, had not gazed customarily at the shady, seamy, but very truthful under side of things. I think that I have seen her in my dreams, and in more ways than one she called back from long gone years the one whom I thought my own, by Heaven's direction, believing then the silliness that such matters are in Heaven's hands. came, I say, and then I thought that a jewel at her throat would not be out of place; and a thousand times rather would I have them worn by her than flaunted in the eyes of those whom Atlanta holds at her beck and nod. Have you ever met this woman, for she is a cousin of some degree of yours? Do you know Alice Ridgeley?"

"Alice---"

"Sh!" interrupted the hermit; "I do not need your reply, as I can read your face, and it was unnecessary to ask I needed but to mention any question. the name. You have met her and have no unfavorable impression. I agree with you. Now, let me stroll with Pudge in the woods awhile and leave you to your meditations. You are no fool. Think the whole thing over. If you have no entanglement, I mean, and I do not think you have. If not heart-whole, it is because of Alice Ridgeley. the matter over." And saying this, the hermit rose from his chair and, taking up his hickory staff, walked out of the cabin.

Robert did not move a muscle while the hermit was speaking, nor after until he finally realized that he was alone in the cabin, and then, slowly turning his face towards the window, he saw the old man standing on the smooth lawn, looking steadily into the woods. Pudge was at his feet, staring also in the same direc-

tion. Then Robert felt that he must do as the hermit requested, think it over. Think what over? Why, there could be but the one thought in the hermit's mind,—Alice. He would give the jewels to the girl, but both to him. So far all was simple enough, but was not the hermit's wish beyond his province? What had he to say or do concerning Alice Ridgeley? It was evident that he would have him marry Alice, but what was the young lady's view of the matter? What strange ideas had hold in the old man's mind! What could it matter how either married or if neither did?

Robert built and demolished several castles in Spain, and then, in calmer trim, began to think that, after all, there might be nothing in all this but the lunacy of an old man that he was dealing with, and would it not be better to forget the whole matter and get back to the safety of the Exclusive Club? It was all well enough to read romance, but as to figuring in it, that was another matter; and where are these blessed

jewels that he talks about so continuously and confidently? Alice Ridgeley was a delightful girl, as far as his impressions went, but, whatever he might think of her, it did not follow she would think the same of him. Not even the hermit's iewels would likely make her change her mind, and her ideas of him were not quite complimentary, judging from what she had said the one time they chanced to meet. To think of this old manquaint, delightful character as he proved to be-being a match-maker! This termination of his revery made Robert laugh and brought him to his every-day level, and he looked about in various directions for the hermit. He could neither see nor hear him, and then began wondering how long he was likely to be left alone. The afternoon was wearing away and Robert began to feel hungry and saw no signs of food about; and he remembered, too, that he had to walk to Riverside, and likely wait for a train there, or for the uncertain ferry-tub and its consequential captain, and the village

of Clifton was not to his liking. Then Robert began doubting the wisdom of his recent actions, and wondered when the mysterious iewels would be in evidence. And as to Alice? Well, he was a confirmed bachelor, and, under a change of heart, if it came, he could conduct his own courtship. Yet all the while Robert was in this rebellious mood the ideas set forth by the hermit were encircled by a rosy halo. Again this much-discussed young woman came very vividly to mind, and Robert could not get rid of the whim by continually changing his position. Let him look from either of the cabin's little windows and there was a pretty view before him. The patriarchal oaks were as suggestive as any wide-spread landscape, and the birds were all in full song. How thoroughly peaceful! Robert thought: and was he really less alone at this moment than when, for perhaps an hour, he had idly gazed from the club window and seen nothing? And he went further,-took now a dangerous step,-and thought how

225

15

full of content might be the love in a cottage that he had heard sung and seen lamely set upon the stage. What a picture was now set before him, or, what a setting for that brighter picture, Alice Ridgeley, did she but stand before him——

"Ho! Help!" and the barking of a dog disturbed Robert's fanciful daydream. The real world came rushing in upon him, and, darting out of the cabin, he saw the hermit attacked by two men. whom he was vainly endeavoring to keep at arm's length by the vigorous use of his hickory staff. At this instant one of the assailants closed in upon him and was tugging at some small object the hermit held close to his breast. In an instant Robert joined in the mêlée. He seized the smaller of the two assailants, and received a staggering blow between the eyes, but recovered in an instant and drew his pistol. The hermit cried "Don't use it!' just in time, for Robert's finger was on the trigger, and the two men turned and dashed off through the woods.

Robert aimed again at the retreating

figures, but the hermit exclaimed, beseechingly, "Don't fire! don't fire! I have the box!" And he held out a small iron casket, of curious workmanship, and then almost lost his hold upon it, so nearly gone was his strength.

"Take it, and give me your arm," the hermit said. And, leaning on Robert, the two walked slowly to the cabin.

They sat in perfect silence for a few moments, and then the old man recovered sufficiently to speak, and said, "Let me have a swallow of spirits; there's a bottle in the cupboard." And he indicated to Robert by a slight movement of the head where to look.

Robert found and brought out a small decanter and glass, and pouring out a generous draught of whiskey, and water in another tumbler, handed them to the hermit, who drank the water and then slowly sipped the spirits. Soon this restorative procedure was followed by a return to former vigor, and the old man remarked, without any trembling of the voice, "I am all right again, and not

hurt. I saw those people when I went out, but they kept well away. I circled about the house and walked back into the woods, knowing, if they meant to rob the cabin, they would find you in it: but, it seems, they had other plans, and followed me. There I was at fault. They must have circumvented Pudge's I do not understand it. nose even. When I came near the open ground they suddenly appeared and sprang upon me, but were careful to do me no They struck no blows. Their sole purpose was to get this box from me. They tried to prevent my calling. but underestimated my strength. smaller of the two was the leader, and continually forbade violence. were cunning would-be thieves. injury to me or my death might have thwarted their purposes, and they knew You were less lucky, for your face is bruised: and what endless mischief would there have been had you effectively used your pistol! Did you notice the scoundrels particularly?"

"I thought only of your safety," Robert replied.

"I should know them again, though both were disguised; and I may say, I guess, to you, I know them."

"Know them?" asked Robert, much surprised at the confidence of the hermit, both in tone and manner.

"Possibly not; possibly not; but my mind is failing me indeed if I did not see through at least one disguise. No more at present; but this I must ask of you: do not leave me to-night."

"Certainly not, if you wish it," replied Robert.

"I do wish it. If you should go, these determined villains will know the fact and return some time in the night. They know I have unearthed my treasure, and are determined yet to have it; and I tremble for you. You have been the cause of their failure, and they are sore over their defeat. You are armed, and it is well. We can keep ourselves alive as to food, for I've more than enough; and there is an unopened

bottle, if we need a stimulant. You need not fear to walk about, if you want to stretch your legs, or you can read some one of these few old books on the high shelf. As for me, I must sleep."

"But what about this curious old iron box? It ought not to be left lying here on the table," suggested Robert.

"No, not there, true enough," said the hermit. "We will hide it now, and open it to-morrow." And saying this, with a look full of meaning that Robert did not fail to notice, he drew from the chimney a brick with mortar adhering to its sides and placed the box in a hollow space behind it. Then, replacing the brick, he dusted it with soot and ashes, so that no evidence of disturbance could be seen; and when all was to his satisfaction, the hermit said, with a smile, "Now for a quiet nap," and settled in his easy-chair.

Robert sat down by the window and tried to read Chapman's Homer, but got no further than the title-page.

CHAPTER XV

THE RIDGELEYS AT HOME

S early as sunset the Ridgeleys A were all at home on the evening of the day that Atlanta Guthrie called upon Henry. Alice had returned from Clifton early in the afternoon—a change of plan-and brought Caroline Rockwood with her; and after the early supper they were all, family and guest, gathered about the evening lamp, which was turned low, for they were all either listening to the many voices of the night or talking in that drowsy, subdued tone that so well suits the gloaming of this time of year. Tiring after a while of semi-meditative pleasure, Henry turned up the light and began reading the paper he had brought home with him. Then he laid it aside, and as no one was talking at the time, he remarked that

he had that morning been called upon by Atlanta Guthrie.

"Who?" exclaimed Henry's father, rousing from a half nap in which he was indulging.

"Atlanta Guthrie; our distant cousin from Georgia."

Samuel Ridgeley, Henry's father, was a man of few words, unless some topic that particularly interested him was broached. Then, like many another, he did not simply talk, but lectured. At his son's remark he was plainly roused to a very wide-awake interest, but for some reason merely whistled in a ventriloquial way, the sound coming apparently from out of doors. Ridgeley looked up with an amused expression, but asked no questions, but Alice was not so easily satisfied as to merely form her own conclusions, but said, "Father, what is the matter? That whistling always means thee is thinking a good deal,"

"Well, Alice, when farming don't pay, and I'm a farmer, I have to think a good

deal, whether I want to or not. Henry spoke of Atlanta Guthrie, and a whole avalanche of recollections, or flood of memories, thee can take thy choice, came down with a bang around my head."

"Do tell us all about them!" exclaimed Alice, coaxingly.

"Drag the skeletons out of the closets, eh? Child! Oh, no."

"Oh, do, do, papa!" persisted Alice. "Won't it be lovely, Carrie?" And Alice turned to her friend for acquiescence in her view of the matter.

"Really, Al, I could judge better after seeing the skeletons or hearing their history; but your father probably prefers to use his own discretion and might not want me to know the family secrets."

"No, it's not that," replied Mr. Ridgeley, "but I supposed they would or do interest me only; but, Carrie, perhaps you may profit by them, as you are disposed to be literary."

"And never does anything worth the

doing because she's so headstrong," interrupted Henry, with some show of im-"I've been at her for years patience. to write a story about Clifton instead of translating German mysteries. There's the river street and the island and Corkscrew Lodge, where some picnic and others can't, but stand enviously on shore and halloo 'Mud-hens!' Why, Clifton is full of small folks in big houses, and some big folks in smaller dwellings, and-but what's the use in going into particulars? I wish I had half your brains, Carrie, and I'd write one novel, at least, before I died."

"But, Henry, it doesn't interest me," Carrie protested. "I don't care for these people that I only know by sight and hear about, and when people tell the truth only by accident I don't think they would figure well in a story. Why not do as I like?"

"And following that whim, accomplish nothing and make no money, as you say you want to," replied Henry.

"Do let Carrie alone, Henry, and

give father a chance to bring out the skeletons. Carrie will blossom out an authoress one of these fine days."

"I'm afraid her first book will be Reminiscences of a Centenarian," muttered Henry.

"Do hush!' exclaimed Mrs. Ridgeley and Alice at the same moment.

"If I may be permitted," said Mr. Ridgeley, laying his glasses on the table beside him, "I will merely remark that the mention of Atlanta Guthrie's name brought back my recollections of her mother and of some of my people of two generations back. When I was a child, and mother here can say the same, I had cousins with whom I was intimate. They came here in summer, and I visited them, in the city, in winter, but now we have drifted so far apart I hardly know them by sight, and you children do not know their children even by name."

"Why is it?" asked Alice.

"Why? Well, I don't know, unless it is the old story of rich city folk and poor country cousins. I don't know

any real reason for it, and I'm sure I never tried to fathom the matter through curiosity. Personally, I prefer the country life, and, as some may think, that doesn't mean not being in touch with the outside world. We get the same papers and magazines, and the only difference is we are more in the light of spectators than actors in politics, more's the pity. But, for my part, a field crowded with a flock of blackbirds is quite as entertaining as a street crowded with people. Your city cousins have given you the go-by, but what of it? We have as many weeks in our year, as many days in our week, and, what is of more importance, we laugh as often and cry far more seldom. We have more time to read and give less to gossip. There is no disputing this, and yet these grand city cousins assume a superiority and affect not to know that they have cousins in the country."

"Goodness me! papa, what has happened to make you go on so on that subject? Neither Henry nor I care a

bit. Is that a specimen 'skeleton'?" asked Alice, somewhat disappointed.

"Lecture. I'm only saying what is true and known to any one who will look without prejudice. Why, there's your Aunt Matilda. She spends four or five days here in the summer, and then she might as well live in the moon so far as we are concerned."

"Now, Samuel, please do not get on that strain. You don't know anything about Matilda's movements, and we were all expecting a ghost-story from you instead of a complaint."

"Complaint? Sarah, I complain? I'm only laughing, in my way, at these wonderful city folk who affect to look down upon us——"

"And don't, half as much as you imagine," interrupted Mrs. Ridgeley, impatiently. "Do tell us about Atlanta Guthrie or some other skeleton."

"Goody, mamma, Atlanta isn't a skeleton yet!" exclaimed Alice.

"I should think not," remarked Henry, deliberately.

"Atlanta's mother," said Mr. Ridgeley, settling into the desired groove at last.—"Atlanta's mother was Jeannette Maxwell, and her mother Ada Bloomfield. They are all Southern people, as Ada, the grandmother, went South when very young. The man, Maxwell, who married Jeannette was a strange compound of sense and deviltry,-I always thought with the latter predominating; and I heard once about Atlanta getting into some sort of a scrape with a young fellow, who disappeared for a time. There was a bit of mystery about it, and Atlanta was in the North for a while. She cut up some of her monkey-shines here, and was sent back again. She was a devil, like her father, on occasion, even before she put up her hair and let out her skirts. They say that she completely ruled the colored folks, and they were all afraid of her. What do you mean by her calling to see you? What does she want?"

"She is on here to look into the

question of the identity of the old man in the Pemberton woods."

"The hermit, you mean?"

"Yes; and she claims he is her greatuncle, Arthur Bloomfield."

"Great fiddlesticks! Don't you suppose your mother would know her own father's cousin?" asked Mr. Ridgeley, derisively.

"According to your own view of cousins, not necessarily," quietly suggested Carrie Rockwood, and they all laughed.

"Why, Henry," continued his father, "I've seen your hermit, as you call him, since he came here, thirty years ago, and he's a harmless lunatic, and no more related than the man in the moon. You had the same notion some time ago, but it's all nonsense. How could he have escaped recognition all these years if it were true?"

"Easily, it seems to me," chirped Alice, "seeing we are the ones to recognize the facts, and we've never taken the trouble."

"Merely seeing the man, years ago, ought to have put your mother on the track: and what about your own grandfather? Wouldn't he have known?" asked Mr. Ridgeley, thoroughly out of patience with such wild views of a harmless lunatic that lived alone in the woods. and was not disturbed simply because not sufficiently off his mental balance to demand public attention. "Besides all this," continued the young folks' father, "your Uncle Arthur went to California in '49 and died there. I've heard your Grandfather Bloomfield mention it time and again. He settled up some business affairs as administrator. I think; and now you expect me to believe this old crank that we've known for years to turn up as a relation? It's absurd."

"So it may seem to you, father, because you've given it no special thought, but when the whole matter is studied there are some good grounds for the idea. I told Alice what I thought, and she sent word to Robert Atwood, in

Philadelphia, and I believe he has had an interview with the old man."

"And what does that signify? Did he prove that he was Arthur Bloomfield? He might like to, and so get some money out of his rich relations. I have two theories concerning him,—he is either a fugitive from justice that has escaped the detectives, or has been crossed in love, and so a little off ever since."

"No, papa, that can scarcely be," remarked Alice, with the air of one that had given the subject thoroughly exhaustive attention. "I saw him recently——"

"Recently?" several exclaimed.

"Yes; I was there but yesterday. I went to solicit his interest in my 'weedery,' and he's to get me some orchids or tell me where they grow, so I can get them; and that's why I wanted Carrie this week instead of next. We are going over together and see what his promise amounts to."

16

"All of which, it seems to me, is a little rash; but how does that conflict with my views, please to tell me?" asked her father.

"Indeed, Alice, I do not think thee should have gone alone," said her mother. "Please take Henry when thee goes again."

"Well, I did go, and the man was a marvel to me; the visit one to be remembered. Such language, manners, and information! It was like the University Extension lectures—no, it wasn't; for they didn't interest me. It was a case of the unfolding of the beauties of the outdoor world and of humanity at its best. There!" And Alice came to a full stop with an air of great satisfaction at the result of her eloquence, although she had overlooked the fact of not having touched upon her father's suggestions.

"All of which," quietly replied Mr. Ridgeley, "might have happened and the man been a murderer. But never mind that; did the old man claim relationship?"

"No, indeed. He was very offish until satisfied I came about orchids, and not from idle curiosity, and then told me what I wanted to know and promised his help. I wish you all could have heard him, after I got back into the pony cart. He told me about his shattered idols——"

"Shattered fiddlesticks!" remarked Mr. Ridgeley, contemptuously. "And didn't tell you how he was going to help you? Isn't that a sign of a light head?"

"Why didn't you ask how you were to get your plants from him?" asked her brother.

"I don't know. I'll go over to-morrow and ask him,—Carrie and I."

"How do you go? not walk?" asked her father.

"Oh, no; I make Toby drag me through the woods. There's just room enough to squeeze through, and then, —oh, it's lovely, Carrie, all around the hermit's cabin!"

"I should think so; but somehow, can't I walk behind the cart?"

"If you want to. Oh, I see! You think Algy Maurice will really come over, and you'll walk all the way with him, and let me play the guide and have Toby for my company."

"Is Algernon coming to-morrow?" asked Mrs. Ridgeley.

"No," replied Carrie quickly, and coloring just a little. "It's some of Alice's nonsense."

"Well, I for one don't believe he'll row across the river and walk here, if it's hot as to-day has been," said Henry.

"Why not use the ferry and drive over?" asked Alice.

"If he does that it's different, and is proof he wants to come," Henry remarked, looking quizzically at Carrie.

"He'll do neither," replied Carrie, very positively.

"I'm not so sure you might not see him, come to think of it," said Henry, thoughtfully. "One or two of the shipcanal surveying crew are going over the ground to clear up some disputed point,

and he may be one of the party. He is a full-fledged civil engineer now."

- "I thought he was at college," remarked Mr. Ridgeley.
- "He was, but graduated at Yale, and now he's ready for any job that may turn up," replied Henry.
- "And not worrying if it is slow in appearing, eh?" And Mr. Ridgeley chuckled very inaudibly; still, everybody heard him.

"Well, I don't propose," remarked Alice, "to act the part of a prophet; but now that Atlanta Guthrie is on the hermit's track, and Robert Atwood has been to see him, and Carrie and I are going, and Henry is in the wake of Atlanta, and Algy Maurice may accidentally happen in the neighborhood,—why, I say, it seems to me that the hermit is likely to have a livelier time in the future than he has had in the past. But, Henry, you haven't told us why Atlanta Guthrie is interested."

"She believes he is rich," Henry replied.

"Rich!" exclaimed Mr. Ridgeley; "well, I should say that was rich. Why, children, the old man is as poor as Joel Bostwick and old Asa Thornbush and the rest of them that live on nothing and run in debt to get it."

"But, papa, the hermit is different," persisted Alice. "He doesn't use bad grammar and can read and write."

"How do you know?"

"Because his manner and conversation show it," she replied.

"Now, Carrie," said Henry, earnestly, interrupting the conversation, "here's a chance. Write up the hermit after seeing him to-morrow and send it to some magazine, or give it to Tom Jesse for the Clifton paper. Just please prove that I'm right, and that you can write a real good story."

"Wouldn't the hermit make up better as a libretto of a light opera?" asked Carrie; "that would be so much nicer."

"Hang your light opera! Anything, of course, rather than be guided by older people."

"Henry, Henry! do let Carrie alone, and let her pursue her own plans; she isn't a child, remember."

"I will, mother; only I know she could write if she'd take my advice."

"But it seems she won't."

"Bother the writing, if I may say so?" spoke up Mr. Ridgeley. "Do let us hear what gives Atlanta the notion the old hermit's rich. If he's wealthy and we're relations, its about time we knew about it, as well as Atlanta." And he laughed heartily at the whole matter. Then, quieting down, he added, "Now, Henry, tell us what Atlanta thinks, and why she thinks the old man has money."

"She came into my office," Henry replied, "as I expected, having had a note from her; but I said nothing of this before, as Alice saw the note, and I waited for her coming to tell you all about it. I never saw another like her. She was different in every way. What her words failed to make plain her manner did, and she seemed not so much

to talk as to unfold in a series of pictures what had been and will be."

"How like her father !" muttered Mr. Ridgeley to himself.

"How like old Nick!" suggested Alice, a little louder.

"How interesting!" murmured Carrie Rockwood.

"Hush, please!" was Mrs. Ridgeley's remark.

"She told how her old grandmother," Henry continued, "had always kept track of him, and how she insisted to her daughter—Atlanta's mother—that he was alive and living under an assumed name, and that he had no end of jewels."

"Jewels!" spluttered Mr. Ridgeley, for he could hold in no longer. "Jewels! that's worse than money. Riches! Jewels! Ho! ho! ho!" And everybody but Henry felt the effect of Mr. Ridgeley's hearty laughter and joined in the uproar.

"Jewels!" again exclaimed Henry's father. "I know. One mother-of-

pearl button, one quartz crystal lost by an Indian, and a few red jasper chips. You know, your hermit is always picking up Indian relics, and sometimes burying them again with great ceremony. Yet you say he isn't crazy. Jewels! Well, mother, if that old man has any jewels, I'll engage to buy 'em all for your next birthday."

"I am not so sure that Atlanta is not nearer correct than you, father. When Evan MacIvor was here on ship-canal business, running a line of stakes across the State, he met with the old man some distance from his cabin, and thinks he has valuables of some sort hidden. happened that MacIvor planted a stake at a certain point, and before he was out of sight the old man and his dog came along. MacIvor thought he was pulling up the stake, but saw, with his fieldglass, he was digging near by, and took up something that looked like a small black box. He did this very hurriedly, and seemed very much afraid that he was watched."

"See here, Henry, if I've been incredulous and all that before, I've about waked up to this business for just one reason. That fuss that Atlanta Guthrie had when a girl up North here was about Evan MacIvor. She's a sort of cousin of his on her father's side. She's related to us on her mother's, thank fortune. Now all this grandmother business is rubbish, I believe, and MacIvor has put her on the track."

"Why, he seemed like such a nice fellow when he called here," remarked Alice.

"And it is not against the idea of his 'niceness,' that I can see, that he should tell Atlanta about his adventure with an old man of the woods; but mark my words, there's something behind the appearances in this case. Just you look out, Henry, for Miss Atlanta. She'll make a cat's-paw of you or any one else. She'll make believe she's in love with you and pull the wool over your eyes and then, whish! how she'll stab you in the back when she's accomplished

her purposes. I haven't seen her since she was a child, but I know something of her father, and look out!"

"Just what I told him, papa, when I read her letter," said Alice, triumphantly.
"But I could see he wouldn't believe it."

"And, Alice, while I think of it, it would be better to let the old man send his orchids than you go for them."

"Oh, pshaw! it's just delightful to talk to him," replied Alice, a little pet-tishly.

"But if Atlanta's around, she'll make mischief you had better keep clear of."

"If Carrie goes with me?"

"Really, Allie, I believe I'd rather not go, if there's so much mystery about it. Can't we get this Miss Atlanta to show herself, though, in some safe way?" asked Carrie.

"Trying to get out of writing up the hermit," said Henry.

"Hush! Harry, I know!" exclaimed Alice. "You drive me to the woods, and I'll walk to the cabin from the road.

If the coast's clear, all right; I'll get my orchids, if he has them, or definite information as to where they grow. If anybody's there, I'll beat a retreat and we can drive off. Won't that do, papa?"

"Had not Henry better go with you?"

"No; the hermit don't like men bothering 'round. He'll tolerate me on my errand——"

"And merits?" asked Carrie.

"Bother the merits! My plan is better."

"Well, then, if you must, carry it out; but on no account, if you happen to encounter Atlanta Guthrie, invite her here."

So the matter was settled, and soon after the family separated for the night,

CHAPTER XVI

AN INTERRUPTED BREAKFAST

M RS. ATWOOD and Helen were breakfasting alone; and how dismal is it to be at a table where there are only unsympathetic persons! The clatter of forks and teaspoons, when they did clatter, was to both an infinite relief. There was no ill feeling, of course, but each had her own thoughts, and was afraid to express herself aloud, fearing an unsympathetic reply. The skill of a cook is lost in such a case, and the servant in waiting was only too glad to be dismissed. It was after nine A.M., and vet the room was as cheerless as a winter daybreak. But, as in early spring, suddenly the sun breaks out from between envious clouds and floods the earth with vivifying light, so Mrs. Atwood abruptly changed the surroundings by smiling, as she was wont to do in girlhood, and sur-

prised her daughter by asking, in tones of great sweetness, "Helen, dear, what do you think of Robert?"

"In what way?" Helen asked, in wide-eyed wonder.

"Oh, don't look so astonished; about his going so much to the Ridgeleys."

"But, mother, he said he didn't go there, but to see this mysterious hermit he told us about."

"Mysterious nonsense, child!" Mrs. Atwood replied, impatiently. "He is only trying to deceive us for some purpose of his own."

"No, mother; indeed, I cannot believe it. Why should he?" And Helen showed she was determined to stand up for her brother at all hazards.

"You don't know men as I do, Helen. Robert has really lost his heart, I believe, over in Jersey; and Atlanta says that this hermit is a humbug of the rankest description."

"And I think Atlanta—but never mind. Where is she, did you say?" Helen asked, with a look that suggested

she would be pleased to hear that the woman was in her grave.

"At Atlantic City. The doctor ordered her to go for a few days, for sake of the air. It's very lonely without her." And Mrs. Atwood sighed.

The sunshine in the room proved to be short-lived.

"And why cannot I take her place for those few days, mother?" Helen asked, in a serious way that meant more than her mere words.

"You could if you entered at all into my views of things; but you have quite outgrown me of late, and cling to brother Robert like ivy to a church wall."

"And not," Helen replied, "because of his superior intellect at all, but because he takes a genuine interest in me of late in spite of his teasing, or he pretends to."

"'Pretends to!' There, Helen, is the trouble with young people. They pretend to this and that, but take no solid hold of anything. I wanted Robert to

settle down a year ago, and when the Baltimore people were here he could have done so——"

"Not one of them unsettled him, that's certain," Helen interrupted her mother by saying, in a rather aggravating way.

"And he was very foolish, for-"

"What, marry a girl he didn't like! Oh, mother!" Helen exclaimed, in unfeigned surprise.

"He could have fallen in love if he'd tried, I guess; but he couldn't dislike them; and one, you know, liked Robert, and she's very rich."

"And he didn't like her," Helen replied, with some warmth; "and why sell his happiness for the sake of more money? He's got enough of his own."

"I wish he hadn't a penny. Of course, my plans go for nothing, and now I suppose we'll find him linked to a farmer's daughter and out of the social world entirely." And Mrs. Atwood sighed as if chaotic desolation was spread about her. In a sense, it was; for her happi-

ness, if she had any, was in finding fault.

"Would such a thing put him out of our circle?" Helen asked, with a most serious expression, for her mother's words troubled her not a little.

"Most certainly," Mrs. Atwood replied, in her positive way.

"Why, mother? Are farmers' daughters savages, or what?"

"It's hard to tell, Helen. They're not in our set, and that's enough."

"And, mother, are we the only people in the world?" Helen asked.

"We should try to think so, and never step outside the circle in which circumstances have placed us; but really, dear, I do not feel as if I could go into explanations. We are different from the Ridgeleys; that's all."

"Well, one question, please, mamma. I do not quite understand. Before you were married you were Lucy Bloomfield, and wasn't grandpa a farmer?"

Mrs. Atwood rattled the teacups and moved uneasily. "That, Helen, was

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years ago," she replied, "and time brings about many changes."

Helen saw that her mother wished to drop the subject and she respected the feeling, but could not shut up with a snap, like a door with a dead-latch. She hesitated a moment and then remarked, "I've heard that history repeats itself; and why should not Robert bring a country wife to town, as papa brought you?"

"Don't speak of it!" Mrs. Atwood exclaimed, holding up her hands in horror at the bare mention of such a thing; and at that moment, looking across the table, she saw, to her intense surprise, Atlanta glide noiselessly into the room.

"Speak of what, cousin, may I ask?" she said, taking her place at the table, and then very audibly sighing, like one relieved of a great burden.

"Helen and I were discussing Robert, but, of course, cannot agree. But how pale you look, and your coming at this time such a surprise! I was almost shocked, I might say."

Instantly there was a rosy flush in Atlanta's cheek, and she said, in a quiet, half-languid way, "Do I?"

"We thought you were still in Atlantic City," remarked Helen, with an emphasis so properly placed that it was evident she wished it were true, and yet there was no rudeness that could be criticised. The last three or four days had made a woman of Helen Atwood.

"Such a place!" Atlanta exclaimed.
"I was bruised, positively, by the miserable crowd on the boardwalk, and such a jam at the station! If I am pale, it is no wonder. I am positively ill. And such food!" And Atlanta Guthrie began eating in so hearty a fashion that her assertion of illness was not sustained by her actions. Even Mrs. Atwood was a little puzzled at her words and manner, but ascribed it charitably to the effect of unfortunate surroundings during her childhood.

Helen watched the woman very closely, and made up her mind to solve the problem of her relative proportions

of human and devil nature, but she felt a good deal of care must necessarily be exercised to avoid detection. She was inclined to believe her best card to play was a feigned interest in her recent seaside visit, which, it appears, ended so abruptly.

"I cannot see what good to my disordered nerves can come by staying in Atlantic City?" Atlanta remarked, sipping a second cup of coffee. "It is not congenial to my quiet tastes; and as to the air, there was a land-breeze all the time. I'm not going again."

"You have quite a bruise over one eye, and one hand is so red," Helen remarked, sympathetically. "Do tell us how it happened?"

"That crowded boardwalk. There was some disturbance, and before I could get free of the crowd some man's cane nearly put my eye out, and my hand was pressed against the railing. But please don't send me into hysterics, Helen, by calling attention to my injuries."

"Certainly not, but I am so sorry for you," said Helen, in a way that was susceptible of more than one interpretation.

After her coffee, toast, egg, and a chop, Atlanta seemed sufficiently recovered to take notice of the world at large; more so, indeed, than the Atwoods. She looked for a moment steadily at Robert's vacant place, and asked in an indifferent way where he might be, and showed no surprise when informed by Mrs. Atwood that he was at the Ridgeleys.

"Not at the Ridgeleys, mother," Helen said, with a deal of confidence born of positive convictions. "He went to see the hermit, as he calls him."

"Not to stay all night with him, I imagine."

Helen did not know anything about his movements, and could not have given, if asked, any reason for so doing, but feeling as if she were in telegraphic or telepathic communication with her brother, and that it was the proper reply,

said, in a very positive manner, "That is just precisely what he did do and is doing. He went to stay with him until every vestige of mystery concerning the old man was cleared up, at least to his own satisfaction."

Atlanta turned red and white alternately, and her open blue eyes vanished and green cat-like slits appeared in their place, and for once she was so far off her guard as to tap her foot rapidly against the floor, which action was noticed by both Helen and her mother, but differently interpreted.

"Oh, why did I go to Atlantic City!" she exclaimed. "I reached home but a few minutes ago, and there was a servant at the door, so I did not have to ring, but went straight to my room, and, changing my dress, came down. I thought it would be a pleasant surprise to you, cousin, and you are more worried over a few bruises than rejoiced at my return."

"I am only too thankful you reached home alive," Mrs. Atwood replied.

"And I must have a little rest and then see the doctor. Dear me, I do wish he could come see me!"

"Why can he not come?" Mrs. Atwood asked, a good deal surprised at Atlanta's remark.

"It is too expensive. He lives so far away, and is so busy."

"Then I'd have a near-by one," Helen remarked, impatiently. "There's no great difference among them."

"Dear mamma would never be satisfied if I didn't consult Dr. Blank. She knew him when a boy, and has so much confidence in him."

"If he's such a wonderful man, with nerves, why does he live miles away, in an unheard-of corner?"

"I'm sure I never asked him, Helen; but there are people living all about him, and he seems always to be busy." And smiling like an ordinary, amiable woman, Atlanta left the room.

When she was gone, Helen rose from her chair, went to the door and closed it, and then, with her hand on the knob,

she leaned forward and said in so low a tone she could not be overheard. "Mother, I'm sorry to speak so plainly, but that woman is a liar."

"Helen, what do you mean?" Mrs. Atwood asked, perfectly astonished at her daughter's words and actions.

"Sh! Just what I say." And then she put a finger to her lips as if commanding silence, as indeed she meant to do.

Mrs. Atwood was completely bewildered, but gave a promise, by her looks, to ask no questions, and with a sorely perplexed expression, or as one thoroughly ill at ease, she left her place at the table and went to her room.

For once, at least, Helen felt as if she had been able to speak her mind and not be overheard, and yet, she was not over-positive, so sudden and incomprehensibly silent were Atlanta's movements from place to place. It was with a feeling of danger passed and no harm done that Helen found herself really alone. Atlanta had indeed gone to her room.

CHAPTER XVII

A NIGHT IN THE WOODS

OBERT scarcely enjoyed his plain repast, although hungry, but he had abundance to meet all the body's needs, and in a sense was satisfied. food provided by the hermit had not been set before him in a way to annoy his fastidiousness, and he suffered no shock, as he anticipated; but still the conditions were too novel, too primitive, too far away from the supercivilized world in which he had passed his days. Once, indeed, he had camped out, as he loved to tell, but it was with boon companions, a guide, and as much of the city in box and bottle as was practical. He was camping out, indeed, but with no approach to a healthy nearness to nature. It was different now. Here he was in a cabin that was plain-

ness itself in every appointment and its owner asleep. Had it been winter and the out-door world in a measure shut out. Robert could not have stood it, but would have rushed frantically towards Happily, the world was now at its best: mid-May and moonlight. We have much for which to be thankful, but no blessings are equal to these. Robert quietly took up his chair and placed it in the open door-way, and seating himself, lit his last cigar, and his thoughts were dwelling more strongly on that sad fact than all else, when he was startled by a shrill whistling that he did not realize came from a bird's throat. Whipper-i-whip, whipper-i-whip!

"What's that?" he asked, and then remembered there was no one to reply. "He'll rouse up in a minute, I guess. It's enough to wake the seven sleepers." But the tiresome call of the bird did not disturb the hermit or Pudge, so Robert accepted it as a voice of the night.

As the light slowly faded from the western sky one by one other sounds

became more distinct. The frogs in the marsh, the toads on the lawn, crickets in the grass, and unseen herons passing overhead filled the air with, to Robert, a most strange medley. One by one the stars grew brighter, but darkness deepened in the woods before him; the trees became a long, unbroken cliff, and the cabin at last was shut in by a wall of impenetrable gloom. Robert thought of dungeons and of all the horrors of. which he had read, and then wondered how for thirty years the hermit, summer and winter, could have lived here and not gone mad. This one night was quite enough for him, and he felt that he should never forget it. Hermit. gems, Alice; no, not the treasures of Golconda's cave could tempt him.

Soon a pale light played upon the tree-tops, and the stars became less brilliant. The moon was rising, but not one feeble ray as yet had straggled from the topmost twigs of the tall oaks. The wall that hemmed him in was more prison-like than before, and the stranger

was this impression as gradually the little space about the cabin became distinctly visible again. If only that wall would resolve itself to trees again, Robert thought, he could breathe more freely.

"But I mustn't make a fool of myself," he muttered to himself, and felt in all his pockets for a possible stray cigar. Then, accepting the deprivation with all possible grace, he said, "If I were a poet or philosopher this might be a rare opportunity for meditation, but, being neither, it's infernally slow. The charm of poverty sounds well in poetry, but I don't like it in the plain prose of my involuntary incarceration. But here I am, and I wouldn't know which way to go if I undertook to have the old man take care of his gems himself. His gems! I do wonder—"

But his meditation was cut short. The hermit, rousing up, came with a vigorous step to the door and said, "This is my favorite hour. Cowper, in a woods, could think hours away that

seemed but minutes; but now, for the first time in years, I have an audience. While you were half asleep and dreaming of your proper sphere, I called back the dead years and have their history at my tongue's end. Indulge me a little while, and you'll be no more troubled with my senile chatter."

"Whatever you say interests me," Robert replied, in a thoroughly honest manner.

"I'll assume it does, at any rate; and when I am fixed in my chair and pipe lighted, for I always smoke before going to bed, I will tell you what I think." And the hermit returned for these indispensable articles. Robert offered assistance, but this was declined. "If I were alone, you see, I would do just what I am now doing. When I detect a lack of strength to take care of myself, I'll go to a hospital."

Soon they were seated before the cabin and Pudge was lying at his master's feet.

"Now," said the hermit, laughing, as

he sent a ring of smoke into the moonlit air that made Robert fairly ache for a cigar,—"now let me chatter. At eighty, I find the mistakes of my life are a regiment and the successes but a corporal's guard. My pleasure at recalling the past is always marred by the thought welling up that here, there, and everywhere I was a fool in some way. Do you like your way of living?"

"Why, yes," Robert replied, surprised at the question.

"Well, never make the mistake of supposing that money spells 'brains.' I did once, and it was a sad blunder."

"I don't know that I ever did; but money is a wonderfully handy thing to have about you."

"Of course, of course. I forget that I've been out of the world so long that my thoughts are mere commonplaces with you young people. I can tell you nothing." And the hermit lapsed into silence.

Robert feared he had offended the old man, though he didn't see how he

could have done so, and said, "Oh, yes, you can tell me a great deal. Tell me of some of your mistakes, and perhaps that will be the means of my avoiding similar ones in the future."

"Age cannot instruct youth, so youth fondly believes. You have the knowledge of the world in your daily papers and libraries, and your surroundings are so different from what mine were. I've heard it often said there was nothing new under the sun. True, there is nothing new. To-day's harvest of thought is a mere gleaning of ancient history."

"Why, may I ask, did you happen to choose this spot?" Robert asked, hoping to change the topic of conversation to one more wholly autobiographic.

If the hermit suspected Robert's purpose he did not show it, but, after a brief period of silence, replied, "Because it is as near my childhood's home as I could get, yet live in this manner. Tiring of mankind, I wanted to go back to nature; and have I not succeeded? Thirty years makes many a wonderful change. Since

living here, I have stood within the shadow of an oak that I had held as an acorn in my hands. I have learned to love these woods, and there is not a tree among these thousands that is not my intimate. I have marked every great change and many a minor one, and, without consulting the landlord, have nipped many an unpromising growth in the bud and planted more wisely. In one way, I have felt, we can improve on Nature's method. The purpose of some poisonous growths has not been fathomed. We must all have some foe, I suppose, to avoid fighting with ourselves, and I am the sworn enemy of poison ivy. do not see that the country about me has improved. The advance seems more in theory than practice, here at least; and the days of goodly crops and goodlier men are dead as the sunshine of last I am only a relic myself, gleaning among ruins, and soon to pass on."

"Then you class yourself with a better generation?" Robert remarked.

"In some ways, yes. There was an

untitled, landed nobility in the days of my father that has perished from the face of the earth. The word 'farmer' then meant something more than a peddler of garden-truck."

"But you spoke of your life's mistakes, and I confess I am curious to hear about them," Robert said, quickly, when the hermit ceased speaking for the moment.

"My mistakes? Boil it all down and you've this simple fact: don't undertake to stem too strong a current. What the world decides upon, that do. I was fool enough once to think I could do as I pleased; but when it's a question of one in a million, you must run with the crowd or be crushed. I tried it and—was crushed. The bruised fragments held together until I got to the woods, and here I am." And saying this, the hermit waved his outstretched arms and laughed heartily.

"But in what way did you dispute the will of the majority?" Robert asked.

"In what way? By assuming I was

a free man instead of a slave. given to understand that to make a fool of vourself at the world's bidding was wisdom, but to do that which you considered the true part of wisdom is to make a fool of vourself. For instance, I loved to read Byron years ago,-do yet; and for years had a portrait of the poet in my room, showing him with an open-throated, open-collared shirt, -and I fretted when restrained by a stiff stock and pointed standing collar that at times were painful. I rebelled, and slowly began changes that looked towards comfort. Here was supreme folly. As I read in a recent paper,-

- "' Fashion makes serfs of us all.
- "'We may throw bombs at her and devise deeply-laid nihilistic plots to regain our freedom, but we wear the yoke from generation unto generation.
- "'As one dresses, so all dress. There is one standard, and those who do not follow are exiled.'

And how vividly it recalled more than half a century ago! You, Robert At-

wood, free man, would not dare to vary by a hair's-breadth from fashion's dictates!"

Robert made a move as if to speak, yet scarcely knew how to reply, but before he could utter a protesting word the hermit held up his hand and said,—

"Now, don't try to make it appear you are not a slave. Why, my good friend, your soup would be cold, your bread musty, your meat tainted, your vegetables stale, your dessert trash, and—nauseating thought!—your champagne corked if you attempted to dine in other than a dress-suit."

"Oh, no, no; that is putting it too strong," Robert earnestly protested; "but, of course, conformity——"

"Conformity! There you have it!" the hermit exclaimed, triumphantly. "And fool that I was to try to be an apostle to unconformity and call it freedom! But this matter of the cut of a coat is tyrannical; and, let me ask, have you yet discovered there was magic in a dress-suit? Magic or the working of

a potent spell that quickens the brain and ripens wit unknown to mortals in a comfortable coat? We are all candidates for inspiration, and he is happiest who most frequently says the right thing at the right moment. How often wit is tardy and the opportunity lost to demonstrate our brilliancy! Are we more sure of it if our ears are threatened by the guillotine edges of a standing collar? Mrs. Grundy says 'yes,' and the world echoes her, but is there never a protest? To shout for freedom in a dress-suit is like calling for help when the dungeon door Birds are in full feather now. is shut. and every mouse is as sleek as if oiled. Their coats have grown on them and fit, and the single one they have proves sufficient for all their needs, social and otherwise. I sometimes think it would be well if men's skins could thicken and ridge up for winter, and unroll and stretch to tissue for summer: then a single robe would be all they needed. Sleeping grubs are happy in their ragged cocoons, and the last butterfly of the

season is no less happy because the wear and tear of a summer have told upon its It is a butterfly still, and gives as lightsome a touch to the autumn landscape as its more brilliant sisters did to the pastures of June. Man must abide by the dictates of custom, not comfort; and black must his broadcloth be, and neither shall it vary in make-up one hair's breadth from the model set before him. He may look the servant in such garb, and servant look the host,—but this is trivial. No personal considerations bear any weight. The world wants the coat, and not the wearer. So, be you as gaunt as a bean-pole or round as a pumpkin, there's but one coat for you, and you're damned if you refuse it."

"But if men dressed as they pleased they would make such a motley crew that it would be disturbing, and in the social world as in military circles is not a distinctive uniform not only desirable but necessary?" And Robert thought he had by this reply acquitted himself very creditably.

"Conformity and uniformity! What a precious pair!" the hermit shouted, in derision. "Women can dress as they please or go undressed, which is to be full-dressed and wear all the colors of the rainbow, but always man in sober black. Your uniformity strikes beneath the skin; there's the trouble. Gathered in your uniforms, how seldom are you really at your best! or so it was when I was young."

"I certainly have never found it so," Robert replied. "As I remember the evenings of winters gone, the dead level of commonplaceness was not apparent. No acknowledged wit seemed at a disadvantage."

"But he gathered his wits before he left his dressing-room, and prepared his best speeches while in undress uniform," the hermit remarked, a little put out at being contradicted.

"I have my doubts of that. The present custom is not a sudden freak, but the slow growth of experience and study, too, of all such matters. With-

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out social laws there would unavoidably be social confusion and society become a mere rabble. No, I cannot agree with you."

"And, my good friend, didn't I tell you that all my life, or early life, I made a fool of myself?"

"True, but you were defending your errors of judgment very vigorously." And Robert laughed at the hermit's sly effort to crawl out of a hole.

"Possibly you are right, but I am not altogether convinced. I did not inveigh against dress, but its unsuitableness at times; but good excuse or not, remember I said I made mistakes when young."

"You probably magnified your troubles and imagined a great deal more than was good for you," Robert remarked in a quiet way that showed no patience with the hermit's tirade.

"No, I did not," the old man exclaimed, excitedly, "I did not; but we won't discuss it. The cat licks her fur and is always presentable, why should not I brush my coat and be acceptable

to my friends? It's a good coat, neither threadbare nor soiled, and of excellent cloth; but no, it isn't the proper cut; faugh!" And the old man started to walk towards the woods. Robert immediately rose to follow him, but had gone but a few steps when he was motioned to to keep back, and wondering what it could mean, he stood perfectly still watching the hermit as he approached the woods or wall, as it now appeared to be. He could see no other figure in the dim light, but fancied he heard voices, or else the hermit was talking to himself. What, he wondered, could it all mean?

In a few minutes the hermit returned and seemed indisposed to be communicative, beyond remarking that it was time to retire. "I wished, not to be alone, when I motioned you back, but to see one who called privately," was all the old man had to say.

"One who called?" Robert repeated, with some astonishment. "I saw no one but yourself."

"No? Well, I did, and he brought

me strange news; no, not news at all, but what I suspected. Let matters rest now until to-morrow." And saying this, the hermit entered the cabin and Robert followed. The door and windows were closed, and soon all was quiet.

CHAPTER XVIII

THEY MET BY CHANCE

"SO, you're really going to see that old fellow who promised you the wild-flowers?" Mr. Ridgeley asked, when the family were at breakfast.

"Indeed we are, Carrie and I. I'll do the talking and all that, and Carrie can hold the pony," Alice replied, with animation, for she had great expectations as to the result of the visit.

"Carrie's part will be easy enough, and yours not hard, but I sort of pity the old man." And Mr. Ridgeley laughed in a quiet way, yet audible to those present.

"Why, papa?" Alice asked, much surprised at what he said.

"If he only gives you half a chance you'll talk him to death, and really I don't like landmarks removed."

"That isn't fair," Alice protested. "I don't talk half as much as Carrie when she gets started."

"And you do talk a great deal better, Alice." Carrie remarked.

"Well, don't expect too much, that's all. I don't want you to be disappointed, but it seems to me dependence on that queer old fellow is like leaning on a broken reed. I'll expect an interesting report on your return; yours, with Carrie's observations as an appendix." And Mr. Ridgeley pushed back his chair as if to leave the table.

"That's making Carrie a tail to my kite," Alice replied. "And she'll not agree to that. Will you?"

"I doubt if I shall see anything that escapes you, Alice. How I wish I had your eyes!"

"Well, make it a joint report, when mother reports the joint, at dinner." And Mr. Ridgeley left the room, followed by a volley of protests at such a lame effort.

An hour later the two young women 283

were in the pony cart, and Toby, not approving of drawing more than one person at a time, was provokingly deliberate in his movements; but the patient creature did not balk, so the Pemberton woods and the hermit's cabin therein were being gradually neared.

He who rambles over the wide world, whether in search of treasure or beauty, will meet with nothing nearer to perfection—which the world lacks as absolute—than a wholesome, handsome, clear-headed and warm-hearted country girl, and she is at her best when in quest of flowers. Herself, the highest development of humanity, in search of the chief glories of the plant-world. Think of it! Whether you will or not, Robert Atwood did when he saw a young woman approaching.

Robert had rested better than he anticipated, and his primitive toilet and plain breakfast had proved so far successful that he felt fitted to meet the world on even terms. The impulse of

the day before, that occasionally almost overcame him, to break away, had not returned, and now all trace of disquieting thought was banished when he saw, coming down the wood-path, Alice Ridgeley.

"That certainly is not the hermit," Alice said to herself, as she neared the opening in the woods; "who can possibly have come to see him, and so early in the day, too?" And saying this, she slackened her pace and tried to see and vet remain unseen. Should she turn back? Then she stood quite still, and first turned a little pale, and then her cheeks flushed to a brighter glow than usual. "I do wonder if he has come to see him on the strength of the note I sent. But no; he could not have come from the city and reached here by this time: why, it's hardly nine o'clock. Who can it be?" She patted the moss and dead leaves beneath her feet a little impatiently, and then said, "Whoever it is, his presence need not interfere with

my errand." And Alice moved slowly to the open ground, but without taking her eyes away from the direction of the stranger before her. When the last tier of the Pemberton oaks that hemmed in the hermit's glade was passed, she said, far more distinctly than she intended, "It is!" and her face flushed as she heard her own words. But it was too late to turn back, and to call Carrie to come with the pony would have been absurd. There was but one thing to do, and she did it,—walked forward towards the cabin.

"What under the canopy of heaven brings her here at such a time, or at all?" Robert exclaimed, inaudibly, "and with a basket, too! Does she think the hermit is a starving pauper? Oh, I remember; she is after orchids. How well she looks! What carriage, what a figure! Why are not all women like her? If ever—but never mind discussing her as she approaches; it's time for me to meet her." And Robert turned

about and walked slowly forward, looking at her all the while, and when within proper distance his face brightened with a welcoming smile, and, raising his hat, he bowed and said, in the winsome manner of the self-possessed, "Good-morning, Miss Ridgeley."

Alice returned his salutation with a cheerful "Good-morning, Mr. Atwood," and then stopped short. For once she had been at too great a disadvantage. Her surprise was too great to be controlled so quickly: that Robert Atwood was here in the Pemberton woods and apparently a guest of the hermit's was too startling to be realized in a moment.

Robert saw at a glance the secret of her embarrassment and said, in a quiet, captivating way, "I fancy our surprise is of equally astonishing proportions, and mutual explanation our most natural topic of conversation."

"But I did not come to the hermit's to talk to others, but to him; so let me go on my errand, please. You may

come with me, of course." And Alice took a step forward.

"I do not wish to intrude, Miss Ridgeley," Robert replied, stiffly, and bowed. Very naturally, he felt hurt at her words and was about to turn away, when she said, in a half-frightened tone of voice,—

"Oh, I do not wish you to take me so seriously, Mr. Atwood. I am only so anxious to know if my orchids are ready, and I can talk to you at the same time."

"You go, I see, on the principle of business before pleasure. Has the hermit orchids for you?" Robert asked.

"I hope so; he promised them," Alice replied.

"I did not see any," Robert remarked, slowly, as if trying to recall any potted plants in the cabin.

"Have you been in the cabin?" Alice asked.

"Oh, yes. I have been here since yesterday noon."

"Here all night?" Alice asked, much surprised at Robert's words.

"All night."

"And is he our relation?" Alice asked, and then remembering a good deal of family history, she bit her lip and wished she had not asked the question.

"He is, but mine more than yours. Are you sorry?"

"Sorry, why?"

"He is not," Robert replied, "what his neighbors have fancied, some one to be pitied, but wealthy, wise, and altogether charming."

"You really think so?" Alice asked, and looked up at Robert with sparkling eyes, full of intense interest in all she heard.

"I most certainly do," Robert replied, and he wondered if in the city there were eyes to match hers.

"Then," replied Alice, laughing, "you have me to thank for calling your attention to him."

"Miss Ridgeley, from the bottom of my heart I thank you." And Robert placed his hand on his breast and bowed profoundly as he spoke.

Alice felt a good deal like a queen with a loyal subject before her. She took genuine pleasure in seeing Robert bow down to her, and said, in a very stately way, quite unnatural to her, "You are very welcome to the information." And then her old and naturally inquisitive self reappeared, and she said, with all the sweet impatience of young womanhood, "But, do tell me, is he really Arthur Bloomfield?"

"He is," Robert replied, without hesitation.

"And why here, if wealthy, witty, and charming? Wasn't that what you said?"

"That, perhaps, I am not privileged to tell. Possibly he will tell you himself. You impressed him favorably when here before." And Robert looked rather quizzically at Miss Ridgeley, feeling he was rousing her curiosity to a lofty pitch.

"Have you two, then, been talking about me? How dare you?" And Miss Ridgeley stood up and tried to

look offended; all of which was horribly poor acting, and, as Robert laughed, she probably thought so too.

"He took the privilege of an uncle and I of a cousin, we will say, of talking over family affairs. Isn't that satisfactory?"

"Lacking a better excuse, I accept it. Do let me see the hermit." And Alice moved on, with quick, impatient steps, towards the cabin.

"He is still occupied, I think," Robert remarked, and held back a step or two. "He asked me to leave him alone for a while, and to come in when he opened the door. You see it is still closed."

"And so I must possess my soul in patience. Well, then, I must go back to Carrie and wait." And Alice sighed in a bewitching way that was another telling thrust at Robert's comfort.

"Carrie?" he repeated after her. "Who? Where?" And he looked about in a surprised way, for he had had no glimpse of a third person.

"Oh, I didn't come alone," replied Alice, laughing at him in a slightly aggravating way, "you might be sure. This unseen party calmly waits in my pony cart, out on the road,—the self-same pony and cart, by the way, that didn't take you to Riverside once upon a time. You see, we had warnings of the possible appearance in these woods of men, young and old, and so I kept the cart within easy distance. I can run like a deer, Mr. Atwood."

Robert was on the very point of saying, "Don't run, that's a dear!" but he choked it off in time, and meekly remarked, "Why should you?"

"I have no decided inclination to do so at present," Alice replied, and was about to remark further, but he anticipated her, saying,—

"Thanks; but really must you go, right away, to your friend and the pony cart?"

"Ought I not to? Politeness is as exacting in the country as in the city, Mr. Atwood."

"And I am to be left alone; that is cruel."

"That is a compliment that is almost rude, Mr. Atwood, seeing that we are really strangers."

"I beg your pardon; neither compliment nor rudeness were in my mind." And Robert bowed, adding, with a smile, "Perhaps I deserve punishment for giving utterance to my thoughts at the moment. It's a dangerous thing to do."

"I know that perfectly; but I must go. Good-by." And Alice turned into the wood-path just as the hermit opened the cabin door, and, calling in a quick, nervous manner, said,—

"Not quarrelling, I hope."

Alice and Robert turned immediately when they heard the old man calling, and looked first in the direction of the cabin and then at each other. There are moments in our lives when all our future is at stake. Robert felt this when he looked at Alice, yet why he had looked at her just then he did not know.

Alice felt this, too, when she looked up at Robert; but why? Oh, why, she wondered, did she look up at him at that moment? She knew that she blushed, and she saw the red flush come and go on his fine, manly face. Hang the orchids! Confound the hermit! Oh, Carrie, Carrie, do come and drag me away!—so Alice felt.

If every gem he boasts of proves to be colored glass, the hermit has been the means of my seeing one jewel worth more than the world's whole stock of gems together!—so Robert felt.

And each concerned with thoughts they dared not breathe, silently, swiftly, soberly, they came to the cabin door as children might at the call of a parent.

"How far has he been making a confidante of you, may I ask?" was the hermit's salutation; and then added, with a merry glitter in his eyes, "I put no time limitation in my promise about orchids, and I have not been after them as yet. But you found something better than wild-flowers by coming,—a cousin."

"Yes," replied Alice, a little timidly; "but I have met him before, and perhaps he is a very wild flower."

"'Pon honor, that's hard on me. Why do you think so?" Robert asked, with some show of unfelt indignation.

"Didn't I say perhaps?" Alice asked, in reply, and looked up at him a little shyly.

"Oh, your explanation explains, for a wonder," Robert answered, and showed by his looks he was quite mollified.

"Am I generally obtuse?" Alice asked, with great show of spirit.

"I have hardly had an opportunity, as yet, of judging; but sometimes your meaning is very clear," Robert replied, and then turned to the hermit, who was waiting for them.

Whether he thought of their first meeting, when she left him at the lane gate, or of that mutual glance of a moment ago,—just to have this made plain Alice would have given worlds. She made no reply to Robert's last remark, and the silence would have been gener-

ally embarrassing had not the hermit said, at the right moment,—

"It is very evident that you would quarrel if alone, and, to prevent this, will you not come in, Miss Ridgeley? I have something to tell this young man that may interest you, and perhaps, who knows? need a witness in the future."

"Goodness!" Alice exclaimed, at hearing this. "Hadn't you better send for my brother or some one? I wouldn't know what to say as a witness."

"And is it possible that your curiosity is not sufficient to tempt you?" the hermit asked, and continued, "It isn't a spider asking a fly into his parlor in this case, but a miser into his den; and then, you know, you have been curious about me as a relation ever since the ship-canal craze sent surveyors through here, from which madness dates the downfall of my pleasant isolation."

Alice was puzzled as to what to do. Had she been alone, as before, she would have been eager enough to see k

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more of the hermit and his home, but now she felt so strangely with Robert standing at her side and awaiting her decision. Could it be possible he had known of her coming for orchids and purposely met her here? Absurd as it was, she gave the thought unwilling credence, and was only anxious to return to her companion. Too long already she had kept her waiting.

"I see you hesitate," the hermit continued, "and I will not press my invitation upon you. You are the only woman that I ever invited to enter my cabin, and you, it seems, decline." And the old man, evidently affected by Alice's indecision, turned away.

Robert, under the circumstances, could but follow, and he was justly annoyed by Alice acting as she did. It was so unlike the splendid woman of a moment ago.

"I will come," she said, suddenly; "but my friend ought to know why I keep her waiting so long."

"Go tell her," the hermit said in a

commanding voice, quite new to his hearers; but Robert understood its purport, and in an instant was on his way to the pony cart and its occupant.

Alice felt relieved at once when Robert left, and so much herself again, she would have begun questioning the hermit about everything and anything she saw had she not noticed that he was too preoccupied to give heed to her. As she entered the room, the little table in the middle of it at once attracted her attention. There were lying upon it several closely-written sheets of foolscap and a curious iron box, that was, in fact, a miniature trunk. It was open. and how she longed to look in! but this she refrained from doing; but to keep quiet any longer was impossible.

"How quaint and cosey it all is!" Alice said; "but are you never lonely?"

The hermit did not reply. At that moment steps outside were heard, and immediately after Robert entered. Turning to Alice, he said, "Your friend was beginning to get impatient or worried,

but I assured her of your safety, and she is gracious enough to grant you just ten minutes more." And then he laughed, as if there were some joke about the time he mentioned.

"Ten minutes," repeated the hermit.
"Well, I will be very brief; and, as I have so often done before, may make a fool of myself."

"How?" Alice asked, almost involuntarily.

"The ten minutes will show," the hermit replied; and, pointing to the box, he continued, "In it are gems that in my travels I have gathered at various times. They always had for me a great fascination, and I have left unwritten—let the world be thankful—endless romances about the three kinds, rubies, emeralds, and diamonds——"

"Rubies, emer——" Alice exclaimed, but the hermit unceremoniously cut short her speech.

"Listen, please: romances of fair women and brave men; and how I have made them love, fight, be wise and

foolish: and spreading them out before me, every gem seemed a creature full of life, and we would talk together, and sometimes"—here the hermit's voice changed-"sometimes, I say, I would have a vision as it were of one more fair to me than all others, and I would look about me, to see if she were coming even now, tottering, wrinkled, wan, and worn, to claim these gems that I had bought for her. It has been a long series of whims that, like buffeting waves playing with a wreck, tossed an old man twixt hope and fear. Perhaps I have been, perhaps I am, insane. For years I had no other purpose in life except to struggle for still more money to get some rare gem that I had found in the jeweller's hands; and here, my young friends-my only friends, they are." Saying this, the hermit turned the box over, and upon a sheet of paper rolled many a precious stone.

Alice started from her chair, but was speechless from astonishment. Robert stared in a strange, wild way, as if vexed

by a nightmare, and he, too, said nothing. The hermit looked at them, first one and then the other, and, with his hand pointing to the gems, remained silent also.

It was a strange scene: one plucked from some old fairy-tale, made real.

The hermit was the first to speak. "There are," he said, "thirty of these stones, in all, ten of each color, and they vary, as you see, but very little in size. They have lost their charm for me, seeing that now the red ones are in the ascendency and seem actually to threaten me. When they were my playthings, the green stones were life in youth; the red, in manhood; the white, in serene old age. But it is all over now. They mean danger to my declining days. Atlanta Guthrie—"

"Atlant---"

"Yes, Miss Ridgeley; don't speak now, please,—Atlanta Guthrie has learned of these stones. She has even been here and demanded them, as if I were an infant and since, has tried to rob me."

"Atlanta rob you?" Robert asked, speaking for the first time since his eyes fell on the sparkling gems before him.

"Yes. Your young eyes failed to see beyond the thin covering of her fiendish face; but still, you saved me from her clutches."

"Robert—Mr. Atwood did?" Alice asked, for to keep wholly quiet she could not.

"Yes, Miss Ridgeley," the hermit replied, smiling. "He saved these jewels for me. Think of your cousin as a highway robber."

"Who? Rob-Mr. Atwood?"

"No, no," exclaimed the hermit, impatiently; "Atlanta Guthrie."

"Oh, I see now," Alice replied, too confused to know what she was saying.

"But there were two of them," Robert remarked.

"True; but the other was a mere lackey in the hands of this she-devil. One of the ship-canal prospecting gang, I think."

Alice could no longer remain passive

or even comparatively so. Speak she must. "Ship-canal surveyors! Atlanta Guthrie! Why, I saw a letter, Mr. Hermit, from her to my brother, urging him to help her and claiming these were hers, or ought to be." And Alice pointed to the gems.

"And your brother's clerk, the hunchback, keeps me posted; and he very considerately changed your brother's plans," the hermit replied; and after a moment's pause, continued, "I am too old to cope with imps of Satan, or even with ill-designing men. I am related to you both, nearer to Robert Atwood. but not so remotely to you, Miss Alice, that I cannot feel an interest in your welfare. What else, in this wide world, I possess time will make apparent when I am gone, but I want no quarrelling over these stones that have amused me all these years, that have been, as it were, my family. I leave you to solve the problem. Not a stone of them all must be cut in half, and each and all of them I give to you both."

Alice sat down for a moment in her chair, and then in a quick, nervous way said, "I must go back to Carrie." And she suddenly left the cabin.

She scarcely saw the path she took, yet did not stumble, and reaching the pony cart could only say, "Let's drive home, quick, Carrie, I am almost ill."

"Why, what's the matter, Allie dear? do tell me! What has happened?"

"Such strange things; but wait till we are home, please. I cannot talk."

CHAPTER XIX

ROBERT ATWOOD GOES HOME

OBERT and Uncle Arthur, as he wished now to be called, had several hours of quiet, confidential conversation after Alice left them, and then they parted. All seemed so changed now, and every feature of the place had become so full of interest and familiar to Robert that he was in no hurry to To merely sit quietly under the spreading branches of the door-step oak and talk to his new-found uncle was a luxury; but as Alice had done, placing the orchids in preference to himself, as business before pleasure, so he must bring to an end his novel outing in the Pemberton woods and go now, first to Riverside and then to the city. Then, too, as he was to carry the jewels with him and place them in safe-keep-

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ing for a few days, it was desirable to travel in broad daylight. His short experience in that neighborhood had taught him its many dangers from tramps, and, as the hermit said, "Who knows but Atlanta in person or by proxy has not been shadowing us all day long?" He did not fear to stay alone, but perhaps it might be well if Robert left his revolver.

It was in the early afternoon when Robert started for Riverside on foot. and it was not a pleasant walk; but his mind was more at ease than would otherwise have been the case from the fact that wagons were continually passing him, going to and coming from the vil-Nevertheless he breathed more freely when his feet were upon the pavement, and he had houses along the street instead of trees along the road. for behind these foes might be standing It might all be very absurd, in wait but so much had happened in the past few days, and so crowded had been the last few hours, that Robert's nerves were

a little unstrung. He had left the routine of years, which now seemed marvellously like wasted time, and gone into the matter of genealogical research quite unwillingly at the outset, and then felt moved to continue it with some interest because of promised sensational novelty. but throughout those initial days, as for years before, quite heart-whole. How was it now? What part would Alice play in the near future? that was the tormenting question of the present, and he forgot all about the danger of being the custodian of the gems. The simple fact of the case was, they were at present involuntary partners, involving thousands of dollars.

Wondering what of the morrow, as he passed towards the Riverside railway station his eye fell upon the sign, on a window, of Henry Ridgeley, Surveyor and Real Estate; and then, more forcibly than ever, Alice Ridgeley came to mind, and he recalled, too, what he had heard of Atlanta having been there. Should he call? He hesitated a mo-

ment and then turned on his heel and knocked at the door. No one responded, and he knocked again, when he heard footsteps that seemed to be shuffling over the floor in a very languid or unwilling way, and presently the door was opened. Robert saw before him the bent form and wan face of the hunchback.

"Is.Mr. Ridgeley in?" Robert asked, in kindly, assuring tones, for the poor clerk before him seemed in need of pity.

"No, sir," the hunchback replied, "he has just gone home. His sister is ill, I believe."

"Sister ill? Oh, no, I think not. I saw her this morning."

"Are you Mr. Atwood?" the hunch-back asked.

"I am," Robert replied. "And you are—?"

"Timothy Smedley, Mr. Ridgeley's clerk; and it was I who warned the hermit about Miss Guthrie. I suppose it's all out now, and Mr. Ridgeley will

discharge me, but I did it for his interest." And the cripple seemed a good deal disturbed in mind.

"I think I can save you all trouble in that direction," Robert replied. "Here is my card. Write to me, now, instead of going to the 'hermit,' as you call him. I have charge of his affairs, and I will see Mr. Ridgeley soon."

"You have? Oh, I am so glad, for I've been afraid something would happen. Mother has been doing his mending and other things for him, and he pays her well, too; and she's said often he seemed a good deal more worried than failing lately. I'm glad he's in your hands. That woman—did you ever see Miss Guthrie? She's one I'd be afraid of, and I think she'd 'a' murdered Mr. Ridgeley if he had refused to lend her a hand to get the hermit's money."

"What! steal it?" Robert asked, a good deal surprised.

"No, no; not that way, but sort of force him to let her have it. When she

was here, she looked like pictures you see of demons and dragons in books."

Robert smiled at the hunchback's vivid description, and said he thought now all danger was passed, and requesting that Mr. Ridgeley be informed of his call, Robert said "Good-by" in a cheery way that was music to the hunchback's ears, and passed down the street.

Two hours later Robert Atwood was again at home. Finding no one in the library or other down-stairs rooms, he went as far as the floor above, on his way to his own room, when he heard his name called, and looking about, saw his mother standing in the door-way of her own room. The dim light, had she not spoken, would probably have caused her to be passed by unnoticed.

"You rather startled me, mother," Robert said. "And why do you speak in such a sepulchral tone? Are you afraid Atlanta will know that you are talking to your son?"

"No, Robert, but I'm all upset, and

am so glad you are here. Where have you been so long?"

"I have just come from my uncle's, Arthur Bloomfield's, and I've got lots to tell, as Nell would say. Where is she? But I'm not going to tell you in the presence of that infernal imp of Satan, Atlanta Guthrie. Fact is, you must choose between us."

"She's gone," Mrs. Atwood said, in a sort of stage whisper.

"Gone? Where?" Robert asked, much surprised at the announcement.

"I do not know. She said to see her doctor, and only a little while ago an order came for her trunk. I went myself to her room, and found it packed, locked, and strapped, but no address, only her initials on the end, as when it came. The man took it away."

"Why didn't you ask him where it was to go?"

"That is what annoyed me so. I was so surprised I did not think to ask him anything. It was so stupid."

"All I hope is only her own things

are in it. Now, mother, here's that woman's story." And without either sitting down Robert told all he knew of her, and in part what he had learned of the hermit, but made no reference to the gems, which he had, at the time, concealed about him, and then asked where Helen was.

"Oh, out, of course. This time to be converted as to feathers in her hat by the Audubon society."

"And I hope she will be," Robert said, very earnestly. "I know what birds are now, after my stay at Uncle Arthur's."

"But are you sure, my son?" Mrs. Atwood asked, with every evidence visible of the doubt in her own mind.

"There is no doubt of the relationship. At any rate, I am one of his heirs, whether he's Arthur Bloomfield or somebody else," Robert replied, very positively.

"And who is the other; do you know?"

"Why, Alice Ridgeley, of course."

- "And why, Robert, of course?"
- "Oh, mother, I haven't told you half yet."
- "And I'm afraid to hear that other half."
 - "Why so?"
- "Think, my son, of your marrying a country girl."
- "Think, mother, of being linked for life to some city nonentity."
 - "But, Robert-"
- "Mother, I have one feeling that overpowers all others concerning my future. I do not believe that Miss Ridgeley would accept if I proposed to her."
 - "I sincerely hope she will not."
- "If I propose, mother,—and I don't say, mind, that I intend to,—but if I do, I hope she will say 'yes;' and now, please, let us not talk more about it." Robert kissed his mother, as he had not done for many a day, and went to his room.

CHAPTER XX

ALICE RIDGELEY AT HOME

A LL was excitement, wondering, and wild misgiving when Carrie Rockwood was seen driving up the lane with Alice by her, but in apparently a helpless condition. "What could have happened?" was on everybody's tongue, and before the stepping-stone was reached the family had gathered, even to the house-servant and stable-boy.

"I'm not ill, mother; don't look so distressed," Alice said, as she sat up. "And I don't need anybody's help at all. Do let me tell my own story in my own time and way. It's only a case of having too much to think of."

"Do give us some sort of satisfaction, Al, after the scare we've had," her father said, half lifting her from the pony cart.

"Well, I'm neither sick nor hurt, in mind or body, isn't that enough? The hermit is Arthur Bloomfield, papa, and he's given me, oh! lots; but really, you must wait. I want to sit down for a while and just go over it all, bit by bit. No girl ever did have such a time."

It was plainly to be seen by all that Alice was a good deal hysterical, in spite of her protesting as to normal conditions, and so Carrie was appealed to after Alice had gone into the house; but she could give them no particulars, beyond an account of her own brief interview with Robert Atwood.

"I was beginning," Carrie said, "to wonder why Alice stayed so long, and was really a little worried at last and wondering what to do, when a gentleman came, and introducing himself as Alice's cousin, Robert Atwood, said the hermit had an important communication to make to Alice and himself and begged she might keep me waiting just a little longer. I told him if she was waiting for the hermit to dig up orchids, I would

allow her a minute apiece until he got ten, and then she must come, for it was hot and dusty on the roadside and the pony was restless. If she didn't come, he would have to see her home on foot. He laughed sort of to himself and promised to deliver my message, and grinning all over his face, he said something I didn't quite hear and rushed off. When Alice did come, I was nearly frightened to death. She hadn't her basket with her, and would only say, 'Do hurry home,' and I made the pony fairly fly. That's all I know, and I'm just wild to know what's happened. Alice said just before we turned into the lane, 'It's like a fairy-tale.'"

"Mother," said Mr. Ridgeley, "do go to Alice's room and see if she wants anything, or find out when this mystery is to be solved. I can't go back to my work with all this on my mind."

"And you needn't, papa," Alice said, suddenly making her appearance. "I dashed cold water in my face to make sure I was not dreaming, and now I can

tell you. Robert Atwood was there ahead of me,—been there all night,—and that kept me longer, he's such a talker; and, besides, I had to wait, and when I did see the hermit he said he hadn't any orchids for me yet——"

"I told you so," Mr. Ridgeley said, triumphantly.

"But he'd get them; and then we went into his cabin, and there he told some of his history, and said he hadn't any use any more for his gems, and Atlanta Guthrie had been trying to steal them, and so he gave them to Robert and me."

"Gave them to you and Mr. Atwood!" exclaimed her father.

"Oh, Allie, how splendid!" Carrie exclaimed; "and you are so fond of finery!"

"But, mamma---"

"What, dear?" asked her mother, very patiently.

"But, mamma, he said no stone was to be cut in half, and Robert and I were to—were to own them together, and—

but I cannot talk about it now. Let us go in the house."

"The old fellow's an idiot, and the stones, as you call 'em, are like enough only glass." And Mr. Ridgeley showed his unbelief in all the hermit had said very plainly.

"Oh, no, papa; they're real, or Robert—I mean Mr. Atwood—would have known it and said something about it. They're real! and, oh, Carrie, such splendid ones!"

"I'm crazy to see them,—just crazy!"
Carrie replied. "How will you have them set?"

"I'm afraid the hermit has set Allie off a little," Mr. Ridgeley remarked, shaking his head as an expression of his scepticism; "and, daughter, you seem to have made great advances in your acquaintance with Mr. Atwood. Do you call him 'Robert' already?"

"Only by mistake, papa; and please don't tease me."

"Curious mistake of common occurrence, I suppose." And Mr. Ridgeley

began laughing quite heartily, but checked himself, seeing that Alice looked pained; and then he said, "Well, I'm glad the scare didn't amount to much, and Jake needn't 'a' galloped into Riverside for Henry."

"Papa, you're real mean to make fun of me as you do. I should think you'd be glad I'd fallen into a fortune."

"You've more likely fallen in with a crank,—I mean the hermit,—and of course you haven't had time to see that all isn't gold that glitters, and red glass isn't pigeon-blood rubies either. I'm glad it's no worse, and I'll get back to my work."

When Mr. Ridgeley was out of hearing, Alice said, "Now, mamma and Carrie, I want to talk to you; men don't understand these things." And, seated in the quiet living-room of the old farm-house, with its books, magazines, and papers in comfort-suggesting, negligent array, the three women talked in low voices, but very earnestly, for fully an hour; and Alice, steadied in pur-

pose by their friendly advice, was about bringing the conference to an end, when her brother made his appearance.

The strange story of the day had to be told again, and he, accepting his sister's view as to the gems, spent the afternoon talking about the whole subject, except when his eyes met Carrie's, and thereupon he made irrelevant remarks; and again, during the long twilight, while out of doors, and, later, around the evening lamp, it was the one subject,—son and daughter having abundant faith in it all; the father doubtful; the mother non-committal.

As they were about to separate for the night, Carrie remarked, "If I were you, Al, I'd meet Mr. Atwood on a purely business basis when he came."

And it was so agreed.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HERMIT AGAIN ALONE

TT/ELL, Pudge, it is growing dark and cool. The frogs are dropping off to sleep and the crickets are drowsy. It is time for us to go in, and yet I hate to leave the old trees to themselves and turn my back upon the stars. We are drawing near the end. I am no longer the mysterious fool or philosopher of this township,-no longer the hermit of Nottingham,—but poor, old, decrepid Arthur Bloomfield, aged eighty, in spite of being half a fool all my life and all a fool for much of it. And the stones are gone, Pudge. Do you remember, old dog, how I used to say your eves were brighter than diamonds and had more fire than the rubies, and tried to prove it by making you blink in the sunshine beside a stone I held in front

of you? What fools we were, and yet how contented! Why should nature have interfered? I could have gone on living forever: even thinking perhaps she will come before she dies, and yet I never thought of dying. And, Pudge, do you think the birds and squirrels and little wood-mice will miss us? Will they come for their crumbs when I am gone? Will they wonder where I have wandered to that I keep them waiting so long? As we are here but for a little while at best, and then must go, why are our hearts so linked to what we find about us? Oh, these mysteries, Pudge! They were nothing until now, but even the whippoorwill sings sadly to-night. it is all changed now. To-morrow's sun will not shine on the hermit's home. but on Arthur Bloomfield's cabin. more mystery. It is like a corpse, life having left it. We are in a procession and must keep moving. What a fool I was to think anything could last! The day will come when my diamonds will be dim. My diamonds? No, they are

given away; and how long will they remain to others as a reminder of me?

"Pudge, I do not think the old oaks will look the same to-morrow. I shall fancy that they turn away from me, that they refuse their shade. Fool again! But if the old ways and the old glories are gone, the new order cannot keep me long. Time's ravages have reached the core, and I'll fall like a decaying tree that sooner or later meets too rude a blast!

"It is something to know dreams will not disturb me. Somnum æternum, mortem est. I don't know whether it is good Latin or not, but it is precious comforting philosophy."

CHAPTER XXII

WHEREIN A DECISION IS REACHED

ATE in the afternoon of the following day Alice Ridgeley received a brief note from Robert Atwood to the effect that he had had the gems examined by an expert, and they were all flawless and first in every particular. value was, of course, very considerable, and now it was incumbent upon him to place her in possession of these objects. To carry out their late owner's wishes literally was, of course, impracticable, seeing that they must be in the possession only of one or the other party. Would, then, she kindly appoint a day, as early as convenient, for him to come to her father's, and would she ask her brother, as well as her parents, to be present?

Never was a letter more discussed

than this one. Had such a condition of affairs ever risen before in human experience? Out of the endless suggestions made a half-dozen were adopted after hours of discussion, and, the day being fixed upon, Alice sent her reply. Then, by common consent, the subject was dropped.

Alice, for three days, was ill at ease; and Carrie, who was prevailed upon to prolong her visit, on the third day said to Mrs. Ridgeley,—

"I think Alice is anticipating a disagreeable interview."

"She must be guided by her own convictions, Carrie. As she does not speak of it herself, I cannot bring it up. But why should she anticipate ill? Does misfortune cling to the gems, or does she fear persecution by Atlanta Guthrie? I hope she will sell every one of them."

"No, it is not the stones,—how I want to see them!—but I think she dreads meeting Mr. Atwood. The hermit evidently wants her to marry him."

"Does thee think so?" Mrs. Ridgeley

asked, much surprised at the suggestion, though Alice herself had vaguely intimated as much the day of her call at the hermit's cabin.

"She hasn't said as much outright to me, but, somehow, it seems to me it's that that's on her mind. She thinks perhaps he will propose, as one way out of the difficulty of the question of ownership."

"But he has only met her twice," Mrs. Ridgeley replied.

"And the very first time he was impressed, I think, from what Alice told me about him,—that is, he went away with a very favorable impression of his country cousin."

"He seemed a very pleasant, gentlemanly man when he was here," Mrs. Ridgeley remarked, in a dreamy way.

"Well, we'll know more about it soon, and how I do want to see these wonderful gems!"

The all-eventful day came. Mr. Ridgeley had been to call on the hermit,

and had come home convinced and with no prejudices in any direction, which, for him, was like being quite another person. The house was set in order. Mrs. Ridgeley and Carrie looking after that, and no one passed through the hall without looking up the long lane. Henry had gone to meet Robert at the station, and at the expected moment the carriage was seen turning into the lane. The two men, so the people in the house thought, must have found much to talk about, for the horse appeared to walk every step of the way down the lane, and that Robert Atwood had really arrived or was coming was only fully realized when the horse's footsteps on the little bridge assured all that the time had come when what had seemed like a dream was about to become a reality.

The carriage stopped at the steppingstone, and Robert Atwood alighted and was cordially greeted by Mr. Ridgeley, who had never met him before, and by Mrs. Ridgeley, and then by Carrie,

whom he instantly recognized and greeted as an old friend, saying, "I believe we have met before." Alice was not present.

After a few commonplaces were passed, Robert was ushered into the south-side living-room,—always so much more cheerful than the stuffy parlor,—and on entering he saw Alice, who rose and greeted him pleasantly, holding out her hand, which he took,

Having determined beforehand to rid the occasion of all possible embarrassment, Robert began immediately to speak of the purpose of his coming, prefacing his remarks with the expression of a hope that the details of the recent act on the part of their relation, Arthur Bloomfield, had been fully discussed. "That my great-uncle may be in a slight degree mentally unbalanced, or as we say, eccentric, is more than probable, but when we consider the whole history of the case, his decision is not at all illogical, except in the one whim of joint ownership of each one

of these stones." And here Robert Atwood poured them on the table, letting them roll, one by one, from a little leather bag upon his handkerchief.

All present, except Alice and Robert, stared at the brilliant display of red, white, and green. Alice meanwhile kept her eyes directed to the floor, and Robert looked only at her.

"I see," he continued, "but one way to overcome the difficulty without materially offending my Uncle Arthur. I cheerfully relinquish all my claim, so that you, Miss Alice, may have all the pleasure and profit derived from them, without the shadows of my rights clouding your enjoyment."

"And I cannot accept such a gift from you, Mr. Atwood. They are altogether too valuable."

"But they are peculiarly a woman's property; and really, I think, Uncle Arthur will be pleased with my decision. As to their intrinsic value, that is nothing."

"Nothing? I thought they were

valuable," Alice remarked, with evident surprise at his assertion.

"I mean nothing to me. I do not need it, and it is a genuine pleasure to make a present to my cousin, if you put it in that light." Then turning to her father, he said, "What do you think, Mr. Ridgeley?"

"Really, it seems so great a sacrifice on your part—but, mother, what does thee think?"

"Alice should be guided by her own convictions, but I would like to see thee privately, Samuel." And Mrs. Ridgeley withdrew, followed by her husband.

Carrie Rockwood took up a diamond while Mrs. Ridgeley was speaking, and placed it on the back of her finger, as if to see the effect of a ring, and as she did this, in a dreamy sort of way, she saw that Henry Ridgeley was looking at her. She felt the blood rush to her cheeks and suddenly left the room, and Henry followed, wondering if Carrie would like a diamond ring.

Alice was indignant. To be left alone

an instant under such circumstances was the refinement of cruelty. Oh, if she could but fly! She was speechless and knew it, and was on the point of leaving her chair, when Robert spoke again. "Please, Miss Alice, one moment, am quite in earnest. I want you to have the jewels. His other property will be mine: but though it was endless wealth, it can never equal the better fortune of my having met with you. The carriage is ready, as I requested of your brother, and in a minute, if you wish, I can be on my way to Riverside Shall I go? and going. and home. must I take the gems with me and tell Uncle Arthur you will not have them? You know what I have in mind. would that you keep them, and I too would like to see them occasionally. You must have seen all this; anticipated every word that I have spoken. Your look when we started together for the hermit's cabin door told me, oh, so much! We took a little journey together then; shall we begin another and